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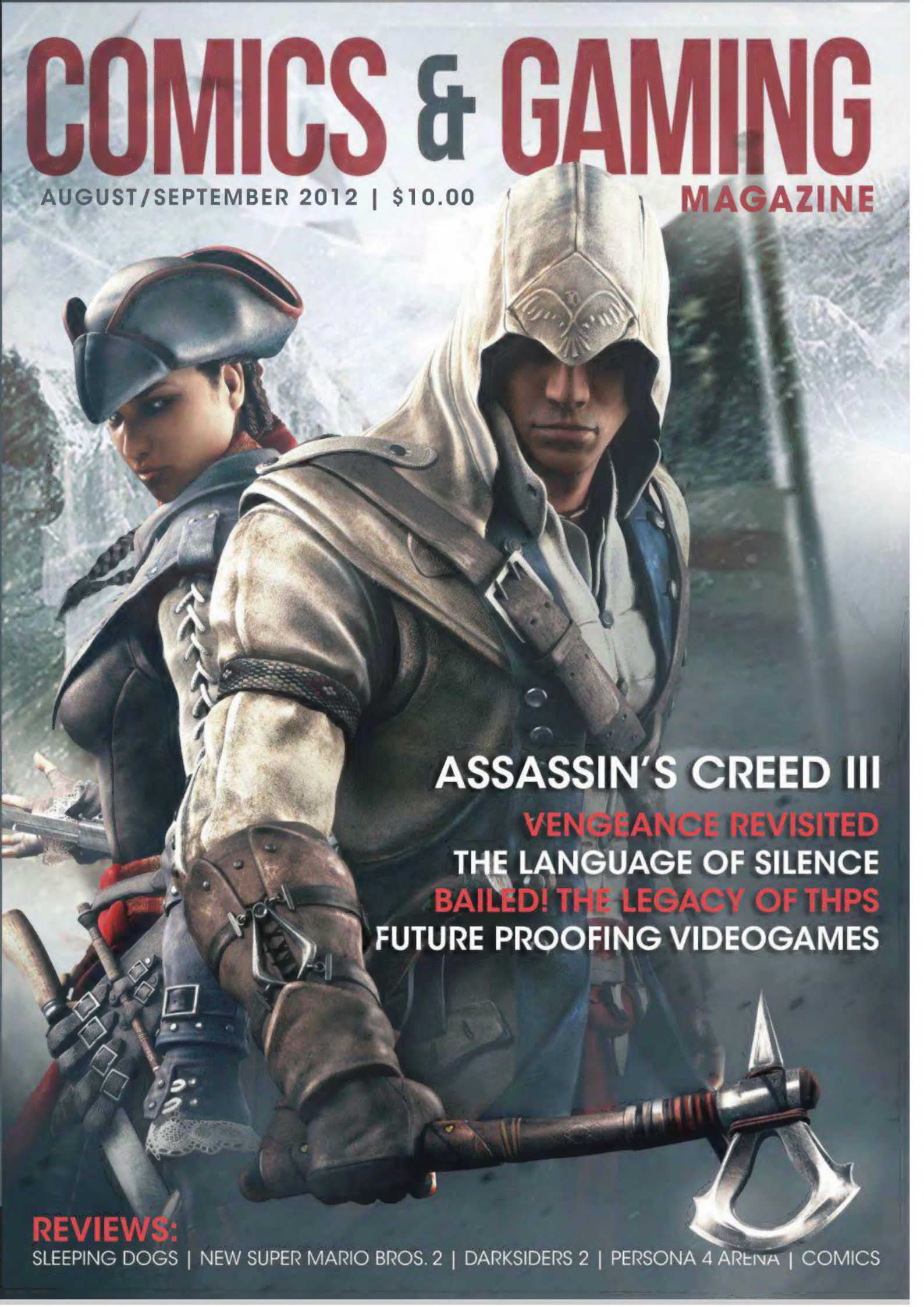

ASSASSIN'S CREED III

VENGEANCE REVISITED

THE LANGUAGE OF SILENCE

BAILED! THE LEGACY OF THPS

FUTURE PROOFING VIDEOGAMES

REVIEWS:

SLEEPING DOGS | NEW SUPER MARIO BROS. 2 | DARKSIDERS 2 | PERSONA 4 ARENA | COMICS

USE DESIGNATED
TOOL TO REMOVE
FASTENER

Goodbye Summer

If summer has to end, at least it's ending with a bang this year. Usually this is a time of year when that dry spell hits and gamers kiss the must-plays of the year goodbye as movies and comics take over. This year wasn't actually that different for the most part, but at least the gamers got to stand by their movie and comic loving geek brethren as the season drew to a close a nice little rally. Over the summer, the comic lovers got *"The Big One"* in form of the San Diego Comic-Con which brought its usual, bombastic sense of pop culture importance to the audience at large. For Canadians in particular, there was also Fan Expo, the big event in Toronto that brings Canadians—and even Americans and others—from far and wide to indulge in toys, comics, and the big stars of science fiction and fantasy in every medium. If you're remotely interested in pop culture, things like comic conventions are experiences I'd recommend everyone try at least once. Sure, it's sweaty and crowded, but there's a ton of cool stuff to be found, and, more importantly, it's a chance for people who love geeky things to be together, and celebrate rather than closet their nerdy fixations.

Fortunately for gamers, this year we weren't left out for the entire season. August wrapped up with two games that I've personally played and would recommend to anyone. *Darksiders II* was, in some respects, a known quantity. The first game surprised everyone with its hybrid mechanics, and the sequel does it again. *Sleeping Dogs* is a complete and pleasant surprise, and for people that are wondering what Hong Kong is like, I'd tell them to buy this game and get a taste for the city without having to fly across the Pacific to do it. Just don't assume you'll be able to run people over and chop-socky them whenever you feel like it the way you can in this game.

And then there's the downloadable scene. *The Walking Dead* hasn't been coming out as regularly as I'd like, but when it has, it's breathed new life into the adventure genre. *Papo & Yo* has been turning heads as both an original game and a heart breaking, semi-autobiographical commentary on the life of its creator. *Sound Shapes* and *Dyad* have both shown the world that once again, Toronto's indie gaming scene is one of the most vibrant and original on the planet.

That's actually not too shabby for a season which the FPS that puts you up against the mandatory Russian foe tends to ignore.

It also means that we've been keeping pretty busy with the magazine. What you're reading now has a good mix of musing on comics and games, as well as hard info on comics and games. Want to know more about *Assassin's Creed III*? Our cover should be a pretty good indicator that we got some new information for you. That and the usual reviews and previews are in this issue of CGM as we kiss summer goodbye and gear up for fall, the busiest time of the year for gamers.

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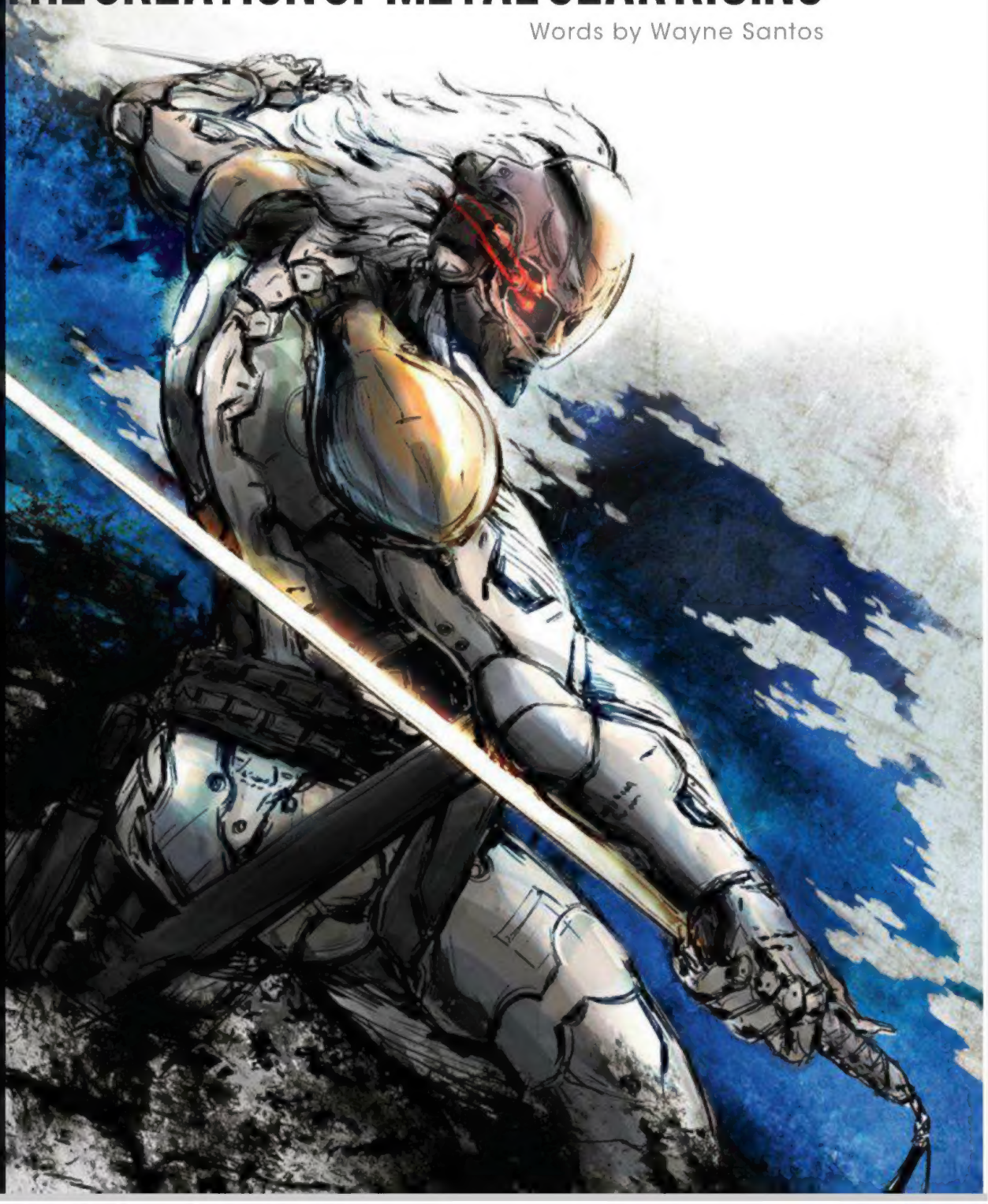
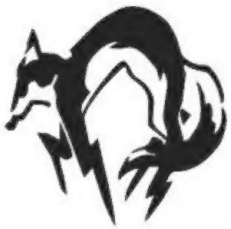
VENGEANCE REVISITED

THE CREATION OF METAL GEAR RISING

Words by Wayne Santos





Metal Gear celebrated its 25th anniversary back in July, and with a quarter century of sneaking missions under its belt, Konami has been steadily drip feeding an assortment of *MGS* related goods to the fans. The *Metal Gear Solid HD Collection* debuted on the Vita, and Konami surprised many fans who had given up all hope by belatedly bringing trophies—and the option for a full install to the hard drive—to *Metal Gear Solid 4: Guns of the Patriots*.

Of course, the big news is what Konami hasn't released yet, and that's a new addition to the *Metal Gear* family. While it's not necessarily considered a true "solid" addition to the *MGS* mythos, *Metal Gear Rising: Revengeance* is a new title featuring the cybernetic Raiden wielding a futuristic katana that can cut through seemingly anything. The game is being developed by Platinum Games, creators of third-person action titles like *Bayonetta* and *Vanquish* that hearken back to the hectic Japanese actioners of previous generations like *Devil May Cry*.

Konami was kind enough to field questions from both the developers of the upcoming game—still slated for a February release—and the man responsible for the entire *MGS* legacy, Hideo Kojima. Without further ado, let's hear what these creators had to say about the quite possibly the most curious new addition to the franchise.

Comics & Gaming Magazine: Why did you select Platinum Games to complete the development of *Metal Gear Rising*? Did you approach them with the project or did they approach you?

Hideo Kojima: We approached Platinum Games. We essentially came to a deadlock when our Director at the time could not get the project moving forward. So we considered working with an overseas studio. At the end of the day, we want to develop only AAA titles that have strong-global appeal to consumers, so we looked at all options.

However, considering that *Rising* is an action game with specific elements such as katanas and ninjas, we came to the conclusion that working with a Japanese studio on this particular project would be the best fit. Platinum Games has a very good reputation in developing action games, and we believe that they can deliver a high-quality experience that holds internationally and maintains its identity as a Japanese game.

By having two leading Japanese game developers joining efforts, we're confident that we will not only deliver a game that appeals to Japanese audience, but create a game that people all over the world will enjoy.

CGM: What do you hope Platinum will bring to *Rising* that perhaps your team could not?

HK: Thrilling, fast-paced action. Originally, the basic concept of *Rising* was to design a title that enabled gamers to control a game experience that resembled the action seen from cyborg Raiden in the cut scenes in *Metal Gear Solid 4*. The team that was developing it internally may have been too tied up with the stealth elements of the original *MGS* series, and weren't able to fully take advantage of the action elements. That was one of the main reasons we partnered with Platinum Games, we were confident they could change that.

CGM: Despite the somber tone of the *Metal Gear* franchise, most games in the series include at least some humour. Why do you choose to include humour in games that are otherwise so serious?

HK: I believe that one of the most appealing features of a person is their sense of humour. No matter how serious a particular situation is, one must never forget humour. *Metal Gear Solid* is a stealth game where the aim is to progress through the game without being noticed and has a very serious atmospheric approach. We believe that if the serious setting continues for too long, people will stop playing. In order to avoid that, humour plays the role of relaxing that seriousness. By integrating humour, it becomes easier to concentrate for a longer period of time. Actually, Alfred Hitchcock uses this method when producing some of his movies.

CGM: What is it that continues to draw you back to *Metal Gear Solid*? What keeps you interested in working on the franchise?

HK: Well, the *Metal Gear* series is no longer only my creation. But one of the biggest reasons this series earned its popularity, and has been running for a long time, is because of the fans that have supported it. Creating more *Metal Gear* titles allows me to respond to the fans, projects such as *Rising*, a title that I'm not directing, is part of that challenge.

CGM: Please tell us about how you got offered this project, the process of taking the decision of accepting it, and the reason why you took it.

Atsushi Inaba (Platinum Producer): I made the decision to take the project the moment I realized Kojima-san was serious. I'd think about the rest later; I'd worry about scheduling *Rising* in amongst our other projects later. This wasn't an opportunity we could have pursued and achieved ourselves. Logic told me this would be a huge risk for Platinum Games, but emotion and pure excitement won out. *Metal Gear Rising* is a project we undertook with "feeling" more than "thinking."

CGM: What is the strength of Platinum Games in this project?

AI: The fact that we're one of the best action game developers in the world. This collaboration will leverage that strength to the maximum degree.

CGM: What do you think means for the *Metal Gear* franchise, for Platinum Games to take part in this project?

AI: We think we'll be able to breathe new life into the character of Raiden through our expertise in the action game genre.

CGM: What is the goal that this project pursuits? What kind of game will it be?

AI: We'd like to make it a spin-off *Metal Gear* fans can approach and enjoy from a fresh new perspective. If those *Metal Gear* fans become Platinum Games fans once they've finished the game, nothing would make me happier.

CGM: How do think Platinum's version of *Rising* might differ from the experience you initially set out to create? What do you expect from that experience?

Yuji Korekado (Konami Producer): Ever since this collaboration started, the proposals from Platinum Games often have bold ideas that would never come from Kojima Productions. A lot of the concepts delivered were fantastic and made Raiden much more appealing.

Both studios hold a lot of pride in game development and have contributed strong ideas towards the overall creation of *Rising*. Sometimes our opinions differed, but we found that the best ideas are the result of us bumping heads.

CGM: Players have always been able to complete *Metal Gear* games without killing (for the most part), yet *Rising* seems to feature quite a bit of bloodshed. Similarly, while *Metal Gear Solid* games rely mainly on stealth, *Rising* seems to focus entirely on action. What initially inspired this change in style? Was it rooted in the gameplay mechanics or was there a thematic inspiration as well?

YK: A big part of the inspiration for this game was to create a gaming experience similar to the cut scenes that featured cyborg Raiden in *Metal Gear Solid 4* – we wanted gamers to play out those cut scenes in *Rising*.

Nevertheless, several of the elements that we created for gameplay, such as Blade Mode and Zan-Datsu, actually inspired the theme of the story itself. There are some elements that might be somewhat over-the-top, but we believe that we were able to create a game that possesses high speed action that tells a great story to support it.

CGM: With a new team working on development and new action-oriented direction, what's going to make *Rising* feel like a true *Metal Gear* game?

YK: The story, the world within the game, the visual aspects of that world, as well as the direction of the cut scenes. Remember that the game isn't solely being made by Platinum Games. This is a collaboration; staff members from Kojima Productions are deeply involved and working alongside staff at Platinum Games.

Even if they look different from the outside, I believe it inherits the memes that have been a constant in the *Metal Gear* titles.

CGM: There was a dramatic shift in Raiden's appearance and personality from *MGS2* to *MGS4*—what's his goal in *Metal Gear Rising*, and how much influence do you have in how Platinum Games chooses to portray him?

YK: In the story after *MGS2*. The times have changed, and the character has evolved. Regarding Raiden's goal and why he is fighting, that is something directly related to the core of the story. We don't want to reveal too much because the story progression plays a major role within the game.

But I will say that the scenario writers from Kojima Productions, as well as designers such as Yoji Shinkawa, are actively working with the team at Platinum Games to deliver a compelling story that is engaging to the players.

CGM: Originally, *Rising* was all about giving players total control of the blade and allowing them to slice anything. How has the direction changed since this initial mission statement?

YK: The concept is more than just "cutting anything", we want people to enjoy "cutting freely". Players will not only be able to choose what to cut, but they can also choose how to cut things.

You can aim at vital parts, or miss, or adjust the angle and aim at the cracks in the armour, or not aim at all and still cut. We put a lot of effort into this feature and want people to enjoy the fun and thrill of "cutting freely" in the game.

CGM: As Director of *Metal Gear Rising*, what kind of game design are you aiming for?

Kenji Saito (Platinum Director): The major difference between *Metal Gear Rising* and previous games in the series is the fact we're going for a more aggressive game design, with the player attacking enemies head-on.

This change relates to the game's story directly, in fact. We aim to pursue the fun of the action of cutting, without forgetting that the same action is taking the enemy's life. He's a cyborg, so he can explore stages more freely while engaging in fierce battles. It'll be up to the player to use the Blade Mode feature to cut his enemies to ribbons, or take them out with more conventional methods. If previous *Metal Gears* were about "silence," I liken *Metal Gear Rising* to "activity."

CGM: The biggest characteristic of this game is free cutting. What kind of impact does being able to cut freely have in battle and strategy?

KS: The core concept of *Metal Gear Rising* is "slashing." In simple terms, the player uses a blade to cut an object to bits, with pinpoint accuracy in selecting where to cut. The ability to slash freely is the cornerstone of *Rising's* combat and strategy. For example, Raiden may encounter an obstacle he has to cut apart to advance, or he might slash a background object to topple onto an enemy and damage it. He can use Slash Stance to deliver the killing blow however he wishes, and seize the cybernetic organs that spill forth. Effective use of Slash Stance is at the heart of *Metal Gear Rising.*

CGM: Other than being able to cut freely, what other specific characteristics does this game have?

KS: There are several. First, the Ninja Run. It's a dash mode that allows Raiden to traverse obstacles with ease, and even run up walls. Ninja Run is the primary tool for environment exploration. We also have subweapons that will be familiar to series fans, like grenades, rocket launchers, and directed infrared missiles. You may have seen them in the E3 trailer. The last new feature I can talk about now are close-range weapon variations. Raiden isn't limited to his signature High-Frequency Blade; he will gain new weapons after defeating certain bosses. This will further expand the variety of combat styles available to the player.

CGM: For what kind of players are you making this game?

KS: This is a Platinum Games title, so of course we're making it for action fans. As for the story, setting, and CODEC conversations, Kojima is fully involved, so I there will be plenty for *Metal Gear* fans to enjoy as well. C&G

The Rise of Raiden

The Other Metal Gear Hero

Words by Marko Djordjevic

For fans of the *Metal Gear* Franchise, the character of Raiden is among the most polarizing. While a fair chunk of people automatically fell in love with characters like Grey Fox, Revolver Ocelot and of course, Solid Snake, Raiden was almost universally panned by fans of the series when he made his first appearance in *Metal Gear Solid 2: Sons of Liberty*.

Maybe it was because we came to discover his existence when we opened the instruction manual to the game, shocked to find out that most of it actually had us playing as him instead of the expected, Solid Snake. It also didn't help that his character appeared to be nothing more than a whiny young-adult who kept being bossed around by others. Thankfully though, it wouldn't be his last appearance in the game's universe and now he's on his way to be the star once again in the upcoming *Metal Gear Rising: Revengance*. To help you prepare for what Raiden can expect in this upcoming outing, let's take a look back at what led him there.

Raiden's involvement starts after the events at Shadow Moses and *Metal Gear Solid*. In 2007, Solid Snake was been in hot pursuit of another Metal Gear unit, codenamed RAY, rumoured to be on an oil tanker in the New York Harbor. Once aboard the ship, Snake manages to find the unit but not before a group of mercenaries under orders of Revolver Ocelot attempt to take the Metal Gear for themselves. In the previous game, Ocelot's hand was severed by Grey Fox but has since grafted the hand of Solid's twin brother Liquid, who had perished at that game's conclusion. Possessed by the hand, Ocelot and the mercenaries destroy the tanker and put the blame on Snake.

With the oil tanker polluting the waters surround New York City, a decontamination rig was installed in order to help with the clean-up. While visiting the site, the US President was kidnapped by a terrorist organization called The Sons of Liberty, who claimed to be led by Solid Snake and threaten to destroy it. To rescue the President and to stop this organization, Raiden is sent in with the assistance of his girlfriend Rose and the Colonel via CODEC.

Once aboard, Raiden's mission goes completely bonkers. He meets the likes of some of the series' most interesting enemies including Vamp, an unkillable super-soldier, Fatman, a bomb expect who rides around on in-line skates and Fortune, a woman who is always able to cheat death by unexplained means. On top of that, Raiden also interacts with Emma Emmerich, the stepsister of Octocon, Snake's friend and computer specialist from the first game. Additionally, we find out that Solid Snake is not the leader of the Sons of Liberty, but it is actually a third Snake, named Solidus—a former President of the USA—who is in control. But Solid Snake is still very much alive, as he spends a good portion of the game pretending to be a person named Iroquois Pliskin, the sole survivor of a SEAL team that was originally sent in to rescue the President.

While Raiden manages to locate the President, he also discovers that the oil rig isn't exactly what it appears to be. In actuality, it is yet another Metal Gear unit, called Arsenal Gear which is controlled by an extremely powerful AI program entitled "GW". To make matters worse, the President reveals that he himself is a sham and that the real leaders of the United States are group called the Patriots, who have made all the political decisions for hundreds of years.

In order to prevent Arsenal Gear from being used, Raiden must upload a virus, which is devised with the help of Emma. Although Raiden manages to upload the virus, the story begins to take another weird turn. We quickly discover that the Colonel giving Raiden his orders is not a real person but instead program created by the GW Supercomputer. In essence, Raiden has been nothing more than a test subject for the Patriots in the hopes of creating a new breed of super soldier.

Even with this revelation, Raiden continues with the mission and with the help of Solid Snake attempt to destroy Arsenal Gear. But when they try to do so, a fleet of Metal Gear RAY units emerge and the two must fend them off in order to reach Arsenal. In the process, Ocelot emerges, reveals that he is a member of the Patriots and confirms that this entire ordeal was their way of training Raiden into a soldier similar to Solid. When it appears things can't get any worse, Ocelot's becomes possessed by Liquid Snake thanks to the hand and he then promises to hunt down the Patriots himself thanks to the knowledge of his host. He proceeds to crash Arsenal in downtown manhattan and escapes by using one of the remaining RAYs.

Raiden awakens on the roof of the Federal Building and is forced to fight Solidus who now feels that if he can control Raiden, it may be his way of tracking down the Patriots and using that power to create a supernation. Raiden manages to defeat Solidus but with Ocelot long gone, it appears that any information that could help them track down the Patriots is also gone. As the game concludes, Snake and Octocon reveal to Raiden that they managed to place a tracking device on the Metal Gear unit the possessed Ocelot used to escape and will attempt to track him down. The game finishes with Raiden reuniting with his girlfriend Rose and we are left to wonder what the future lies for him.

After the release of *Sons of Liberty*, even after the poor response to his character, he would still make appearances in future *Metal Gear Solid* titles. To show that Kojima Productions heard the complaints, a character in the prequel, *Metal Gear Solid 3: Snake Eater* was made to resemble Raiden as a form of a parody. His name was Raikov, who Naked Snake has to impersonate in the game while making his escape. Additionally, it was implied that the character of Raikov was the secret lover of one of the antagonists of the game, Colonel Volgin.

Raiden's proper return to the series took him in a completely different direction with the release *Metal Gear Solid 4: Guns of the Patriots* in 2008. After the events of *Sons of Liberty*, Raiden began to go through various stages of depression and confusion over who he was and what he should be. Originally, *Metal Gear Solid Rising* was supposed to chronicle the events that changed Raiden from the character we played as in *MGS2* to the character he became in *MGS4*.

Feeling that he was only suited for the battlefield, his role as a super soldier began to expand. He got himself outfitted with an exoskeleton suit which made him even deadlier. He rejoined Solid Snake and Otacon as they continue to search for Revolver Ocelot (who at this point has become completely possessed by the hand of Liquid Snake).

Raiden's first appearance in the game occurs as Solid Snake attempts to leave a South American country with Naomi Campbell, the doctor from *Metal Gear Solid* who inflicted both he and Liquid with the FOXDIE virus that was meant to serve as a control mechanism for all members of Big Boss' group, FOXHOUND. As the two escaped, Raiden ran interference in a very lengthy battle with Vamp, who now had an even greater role alongside Ocelot. Their fight gave Campbell and Snake enough time to escape successfully, but Raiden was severely injured in the process. Before Raiden passed out from the loss artificial blood in his system, he urged Snake to travel to Europe to find what he was looking for.

When Snake's journey brings him back to Shadow Moses Island, he encounters Vamp once again. While the two fight, a group of Gekko units (unmanned mechs that resemble Metal Gears) appeared, pro-

grammed to self-destruct. Just as they were about to explode, Raiden reappeared, destroyed the initial set of units and told Snake that he wanted to take care of Vamp himself. The screen is split at that point, with the left side having the player taking control of Snake, who is fighting Gekko units, while other shows Vamp and Raiden duke it out.

Having already taken enough damage to take down an entire army, Raiden continued to assist Snake in the search for Ocelot. When Snake used the Metal Gear REX from Shadow Moses to escape, Ocelot appeared with a Metal Gear RAY. The two fought and both Metal Gears were destroyed in the process. Afterwards, Ocelot revealed Outer Haven, a warship capable of devastating destruction and planned on using it to kill both Snake and destroy the island.

As Outer Haven headed towards the mainland and an immobilized Solid Snake, Raiden once again came to the rescue. Using only his cybernetic strength, he slowed down the ship long enough to allow for Snake to free himself. In the process, Raiden lost an arm and we are led to believe that he died.

But of course, Raiden didn't actually perish and returned to Snake's aid, this time on board Outer Haven. While Snake moved through a microwave chamber to the ship's central processor to infect it with a lethal virus, Raiden fought various members of Liquid's forces. Incorporating split-screen again, as the player, you control Snake as he struggles to proceed to the microwave chamber while the other screen shows various sequences involving other allies of Snake, including Raiden.

Snake managed to stop Outer Haven, concluding with ultimate duel against Revolver (Liquid) Ocelot and discovered the truth behind the Patriots and other elements of the game's story. At the same time, Raiden discovered the truth behind why his girlfriend, Rose from *MGS 2*, had disappeared. Originally, it appeared that their relationship ended after she lost her baby during pregnancy. In actuality, the baby was born healthy but kept hidden to protect it in case there was any attempt by the Patriots to take it and use it in their testing. As the game closes, the two get back together and all seems right for Raiden.

So that about sums up Raiden's original involvement in the *Metal Gear Solid* universe. Of course, there is a lot more to the series and thankfully with the release of the *Metal Gear Solid HD Collection* and the recent trophy-patch update for *Metal Gear Solid 4*, if you haven't ever experienced the crazy, roller-coaster series, now is your chance. It will be interesting to see where Platinum Games takes Raiden and if this could be the start of a whole new, long-running series. CG

Across the Pond

The Highlights of GamesCom 2012

Words by Chris Leddy

Europe's largest gaming related event has just whisked past, offering a brilliant insight into some of the biggest titles launching within the next year up. Amongst those big hitters were; *Call of Duty Black Ops 2*, *Borderlands 2*, *Lost Planet 3*, *Devil May Cry*, *Tekken Tag Tournament 2*, *Dishonored* and of course *Tractor Simulator 2012*.

Capcom's caged off area was probably the most impressive to me with the *Devil May Cry* reboot, *Lost Planet 3*, *Resident Evil 6* and *Street Fighter X Tekken* all playable and leaving a lasting impression. The reimagining of Devil May Cry was frowned upon by fans to begin. In fact it's a breath of fresh air, bringing the series back to its earlier, greater roots. The latest *DMC* title in the series looks to change lagging fortunes of the franchise with a revamped Dante who is 100 per cent more British and sporting an entirely new set of skills.

The overall feel of the game is a much purer experience, with better controls and some great combat sequences. And whilst the new Dante can grate a little after a while, his hilarious banter with enemies will keep you chuckling throughout an overall improved gaming experience. I can't see any reason as to why fans won't instantly fall in love with this title - in fact I recommend the new *DMC* to anyone who likes the hack-and-slash genre but were put off the *DMC* franchise previously due to its overly complicated story lines and repetitive game play.

While my time within the Capcom booth was relatively short, I did go back for seconds, getting a hands on preview with Spark Unlimited's *Lost Planet 3*, set prior to the events of the first *Lost Planet*, *LP3* features a brand new character - a colonist and miner named Jim living on the deadly planet of E.D.N.III working to gather thermal energy and to place the beacons that later become check points in both *Lost Planet 1* and *2*.

I should state prior to this that *Lost Planet 2* remains one of my favourite games of all time, its co-op mechanic made it one of the best multiplayer games to date, however, *Lost Planet 3* has decided to scrap such a mechanic and has forced its game play down a route that's midway between pseudo-RPG, mech combat and third-person cover shooter, which for some strange reason works. I expected mass disappointment, but I can quite happily say that *Lost Planet 3* is my game of the show.

You can definitely tell that whilst Capcom produced this title it's very much more western based. The game play while mirroring previous entries in the series also goes places that western developers love to favour, adding free roaming, side missions and the ability to gruesomely pull crazed creatures to pieces with giant mech arms and drills. All in all the whole experience feels "American" and not just Western, something about it recalls a series of sci-fi-esque American drama shows set on dystopian worlds, it reeks of the Stars and Stripes and I absolutely love it!

Within the demo I trawled through the snowy wastelands, experienced a storm, tortured some critters and fought a giant turtle-like monster – All in all I can't really ask for much more. The controls were extremely solid, the cut scenes had me interested and the game looks to be extremely promising. I can't help but think I'll miss the fantastic co-op that *LP2* offered, but perhaps this is a step in the right direction for the series.

Namco Bandai offered some impressive titles this year too, my attention was drawn predominantly towards *Star Trek*, *Dark Souls: Prepare to Die Edition* and *Tekken Tag Tournament 2*. *Star Trek* was only a trailer, but it managed to excite me. It previewed co-op game play

between the recent theatrical reboot's Kirk and Spock in a genre clash between puzzle and third-person cover shooter. The preview had us watch two players travel through a recently ravaged Vulcan science lab, demonstrating a mixture of Spock's up close stun attacks, long ranged Phaser combat and the use of the Tricorder to inspect visual prompts based around the room. More impressively the game was hugely centered on co-op game play, but it also split off into single player scenarios where Kirk would be put into a cut scene based dilemma, whilst Spock would still be interactive and could have a direct effect on what happened within that cut scene. The preview then went onto specifically introduce the main villains of the title; the Gorn – the race famous for the best fist fight in sci-fi history.

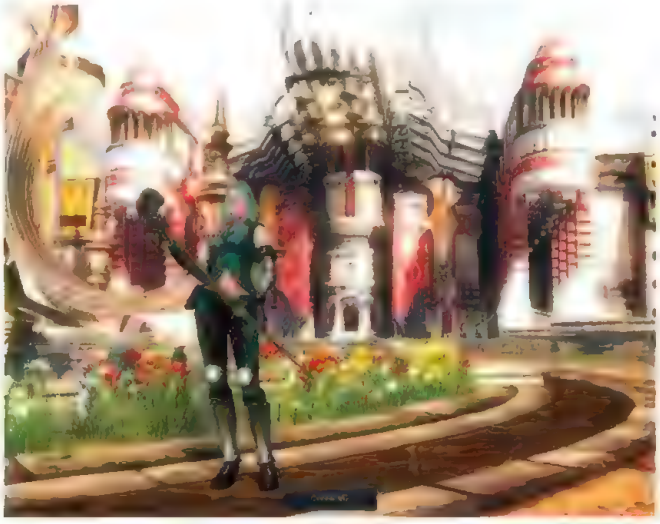
The preview of *Dark Souls: Prepare to Die Edition* featured no new game play. It did, however, give me a chance to try out the PC controls, as well as an opportunity to see how the PC version handled in terms of graphics and speed. It has been no secret that *Dark Souls: PTD Edition* hasn't lived up to a lot of fan's expectations, specifically having its frames per second bottled to 30, due to the fact that it is a direct console port. I can now happily report that at least the game plays just as the console version does – perfectly. As for the controls, the keyboard and mouse set up are way too cumbersome to be any one's favoured control scheme. They are usable, but I recommend plugging in either a PS3 or 360 controller to play.

As someone who isn't exactly a master at fighting games I found it hard to feel any key differences between previous iterations of the *Tekken* franchise and *Tekken Tag Tournament 2*, however, it does quite prominently feature a tag component that allows you to switch between two of your favourite fighters from the series, I picked Hwoarang and Jack the Kangaroo. The game play was reminiscent of most *Tekken* titles, with a tidy graphic update and online features as expected, however nothing that instantly jumped out to convince me to buy this game, perhaps one to look into If you're either a fan of fighting games and/or *Tekken*.

GamesCom had a surprisingly large amount of MMOs present ranging from Blizzard's *World of Warcraft* to Trion's *Guild Wars 2*. What stood out most for me was Perfect World's *Raiderz*, a brand new hack and slash MMORPG that not only features combat that doesn't consist of the usual basic MMO gameplay, but also a great open world and beautiful scenery. Open worlds, character customisation and PvP are all the standard for this genre; however its combat is what sets it apart, being similar to *Phantasy Star Online*, but much more active, with blocking and dodging having actual effects on battle.

In the demo I ventured around a huge snowy landscape as a warrior-esque figure, brandishing both a sword and shield. I encountered some Ogre-like beasts and was given a specific number to hunt and kill, however it didn't feel like a drag. Even the grinding within this title feels fresh and dynamic, allowing you to make battles quite cinematic If you so wish.

Sony had one of the biggest areas within GamesCom this year, with titles such as LittleBigPlanet Karting and *PlayStation All Stars Battle Royale* showing off some of the huge IPs that Sony have their mitts on. Surpris-



games com 2012

ingly *PS:ASBR* (Doesn't quite roll off the tongue) was a lot of fun. Others have rightly compared it to Nintendo's *Super Smash Bros.* series but it does have its own merits. Its cast of Sony first and third-party characters are stupendously awesome, we had a run of 20 to play around with and once I'd played with a few of my person favourites such Nathan Drake and SackBoy, I discovered Ratchet and dominated four rounds straight.

The controls and feel to the game are very "*Smash Bros.*" and as much as I hate to compare it continuously, it's easy to see that *SSB* was the inspiration here. It's unfair to write off *PS:ASBR* based on that alone; what it does, it does very well. It's not the next fighting game for everyone, but it is definitely a fun brawler featuring some great character, awesome settings and fun game play, don't expect it to melt any minds or leave a mark on your gaming life, but pick this up as soon as possible, it's a whole lot of fun and it really can't do any wrong.

As for SackBoy's solo project; *LittleBigPlanet Karting* you can expect a somewhat similar experience to the likes of *Mario Kart.* Once more I truly cannot see any problems with that. Outside of *Crash Team Racing* back on the PS1 there's never really been any karting games that have left an impression as large as Nintendo's racing flagship. *LBP Karting* actually stands a chance, with aspects of the creatively brilliant *LittleBigPlanet* throw in there *LBP Karting* offers more than the usual karter, allowing players to not only customise their sack boys, but also the tracks they race on.

LBP Karting doesn't quite offer the freedom that *LBP* does, but I can however see a lot coming from its track editor.

All in all GamesCom had some amazing titles on show this year; some leaving me feeling exasperated and disappointed, others leaving me wanting more. *Lost Planet 3* has me sitting here with a "GOTY" stamp just waiting for an excuse to slam it down all over that snowy, beautiful wasteland. And *Raiderz* has finally broken the horrible mantra that carries with MMORPGs, making it a genre I want to be a part of again.

If we were to crown a definitive "winner" of GamesCom it would truly have to be Sony; not only because Microsoft and Nintendo refused to show their line up at all, but because their newer titles really are striving to be what games should be, there was. CGG

Where Do We Go From Here?

The Reinvention of the Comic Book Movie

Words by Phil Brown

Back in the ancient days of 2008, *Iron Man* and *The Dark Knight* made so much damn money that comic book movies became new dominant blockbuster format. Comic-Con turned into one of the major entertainment events of the year, hosting almost as many flashbulbs as the Cannes Film Festival. In an unprecedented move, Marvel Comics suddenly had their own production studio rather than farming out their characters. It seemed like the genre couldn't get more popular. Flash ahead five years and somehow the superhero movies are even bigger. *The Dark Knight Rises* is set to match the billion dollar gross of its predecessor and that's considered a disappointment compared to *The Avengers'* record breaking numbers. Superhero movies aren't just geek-friendly hits anymore, they are now Hollywood's biggest business. With Marvel and DC tied to arguably the two biggest studios in LaLaland (Disney and Warner Brothers), we're only going to see more of these flicks in the future. Should be nerd nirvana, right? Well, the trouble is that this seems like a peak that can't be topped. The future might be bright for comic book movie fans based on quantity, but whether or not this superhero trend is sustainable is a whole other story.

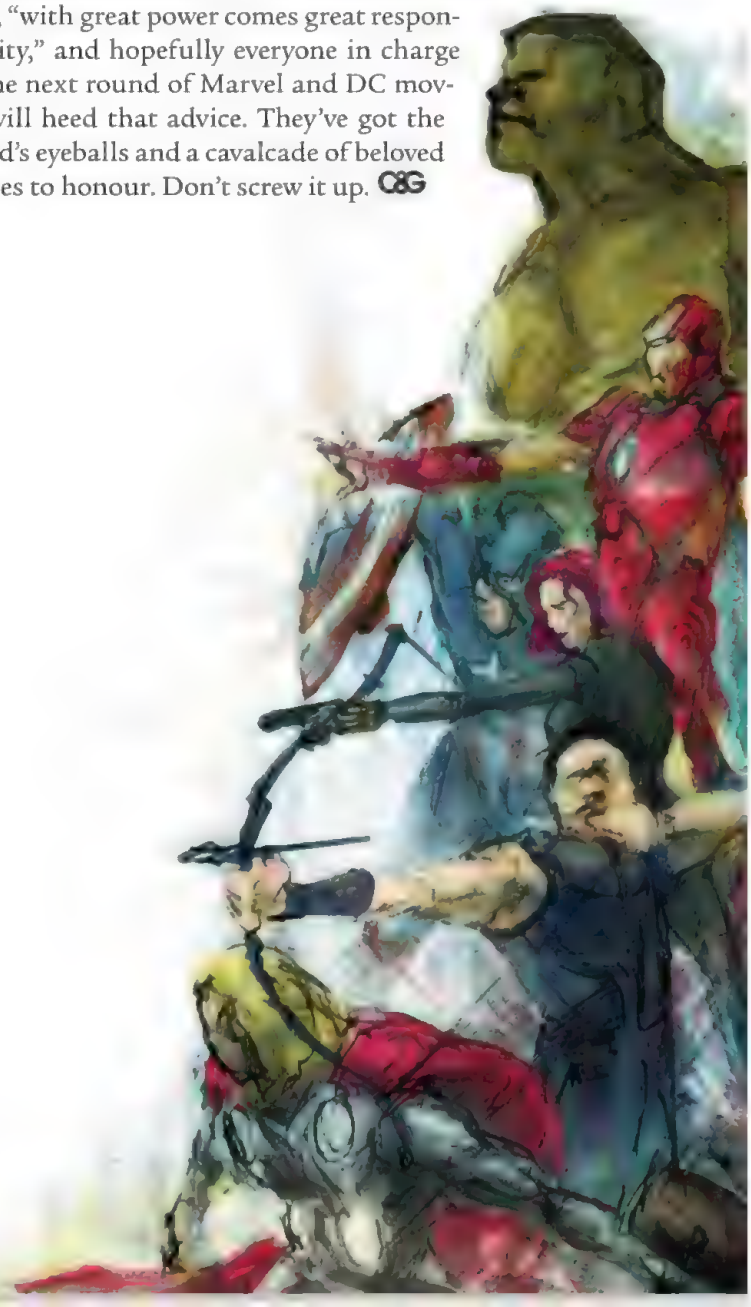
It's interesting and appropriate that Marvel and DC now rule the movie world in the same way they've towered over the comic book landscape for decades. The companies have even managed to foster the same differing identities they had during the comic book glory days of the 80s. Thanks to Nolan's *Dark Knight* trilogy, Warner fancies the DC universe as a place where superheroes are taken seriously and auteurs can make multimillion dollar action think pieces (not unlike how they pushed out prestige format graphic novels for star writers like Frank Miller and Alan Moore in the 80s). Marvel on the other hand goes for sheer entertainment with a blanket studio tone that's both respectful and tongue-in-cheek in an ever-growing universe filled with merchandising opportunities. They are both clever strategies that have earned the companies mucho dollaros. The question is whether or not that's sustainable and based on the decline of comic book popularity since both companies peaked with these exact strategies with their books, that's unlikely. The obscene popularity of these films right now can be tied to the fact that no one had ever seen anything like *Dark Knight* or *The Avengers* before and the thing about superhero yarns is that the are episodic and repetitive by nature. There will be a hardcore fan base that sticks through all the films (superheroes tend to attract obsessives), but not on the billion dollar level the studios have become accustomed to. The future is not as bright or filled with bags of gold coins as the studios would like to believe.

Let's start with DC. Yes Chris Nolan's *Dark Knight* franchise proved superhero movies could be taken seriously and distinguished that series from the Marvel superhero onslaught. Here's the thing though, Batman is different from most superheroes. With no superpowers beyond wealth and a tragic quest for justice, it's possible to push that character into something resembling the real world. Not to mention the fact that there's something about Batman that just clicks with the public more than any other costumed crimefighter (don't forget Batmania didn't just take over pop culture in the last five years, it already happened on a similarly mass scale in the 60s and the 80s). DC/Warner Brothers' attempt to launch "dark" comic book movies in *Watchmen* and *Green Lantern* were not nearly as successful, in part because they weren't *Batman*. Warners' has made it pretty clear that they intend

to launch their DC franchises with an eye on a Justice League mash-up movie to make some of that *Avengers* cash. It's going to start with next summer's *Man of Steel* and already that thing seems like a misfire. Superman is a great piece of American iconography, but he's also a very old fashioned brand of hero. You can't really humanize or force philosophical weight onto an action figure (see *Superman Returns* for proof) and that approach has disaster written all over it, especially in the hands of Zack the hack Snyder (*Sucker Punch*, what else do you need?). Characters like Wonder Woman and The Flash are equally iconic and antiquated, relying on magical powers, invisible jets, complex mythologies, and silly costumes in a way that doesn't suit a sombre tone. If DC were to make a goofy Justice League movie with a Marvelesque tone, that could work. However, they want the self-sustaining universe based on Marvel model and that will get them into trouble. A brooding Batman is one thing. A brooding comic book universe? That'll be like the lonely table of goth kids at the blockbuster party.

Now, how about Marvel? Their six movie master plan was executed to perfection (well...minus *The Incredible Hulk*). Now they've got an impressive universe of characters at their disposal ready for expansion and decades of classic tales to adapt. In a perfect world they could now reclaim control of their A-team characters like *Spider-Man*, *X-Men*, and *The Fantastic Four* and bring them into the fold. Unfortunately they sold the rights to all those characters (and *Daredevil*) to finance their studio and none of the studios who own them will give them back. Essentially Marvel, created a movie empire out of their B-team (seriously, how many people loved Iron Man before the movies?), but at least they all had decades of pop culture cache. Now their plan is to introduce the likes of *Ant Man* and *Guardians Of The Galaxy* and while they might be good characters, that's going to be a tougher sell. While it was amazing to see the Marvel universe being built, now they have six movies of backstory. As anyone who got into Marvel comics in the midst their run in the 80s or 90s can tell you, it was a difficult task to try and piece together the arcing narratives midstream. New audiences will now have to play catch up on sequels. That doesn't mean the movies won't be exciting, it just means the appeal will become more selective. Then there's the fact that Marvel's thrifty contracts with the likes of Robert Downey Jr. will expire shortly and they might not be able to afford to pay superstar salaries as well as massive SFX budgets. Marvel Studios head Kevin Fiege has already discussed dropping Downey and recasting the character like James Bond and if that starts happening, expect additional audience drop off.

It might seem strange to discuss the downfall of the superhero movie in the midst of the genre's peak, but what goes up must come down. There will always be a hardcore fan contingent that will keep these films alive. Mass audience acceptance is a whole other story. Let's not forget that the likes of Sylvester Stallone, Bruce Willis, and Arnold Schwarzenegger need to team up these days just to bring in a fraction of *The Avengers* audience. Trends change and this too will pass. Warners is going to have a hard time getting their DC rogues gallery as wide an audience as *Batman* (a franchise that will surely be rebooted soon) and now that Marvel has established its world, their movies will get increasingly esoteric (thrilling the geeks and scaring off everyone else). As for Marvel's lost characters, they will all get new movies but without Marvel Studios in charge it's hard to imagine they will be anything other than cash grabs that will dilute fan appreciation (*The Amazing Spider-Man*, anyone?). So soak it up now, because this near 100 per cent success rate for superhero movies will not continue. Massive success means battling egos and concerns about profitability over creativity. As a wise man once said, "with great power comes great responsibility," and hopefully everyone in charge of the next round of Marvel and DC movies will heed that advice. They've got the world's eyeballs and a cavalcade of beloved heroes to honour. Don't screw it up. C&G



A NEW FRONTIER

An Interview with Alex Hutchinson of Ubisoft Montreal

Words by Tim Ashdown

Just five short years ago *Assassin's Creed* from Ubisoft's Montreal studio burst on to the gaming scene. While the game had its flaws it was enough of a commercial success to warrant a sequel. *Assassin's Creed II*, released in 2009, improved the experience so much that it was given two follow-ups *Assassin's Creed: Brotherhood* and *Assassin's Creed: Revelations*. This fall we'll meet an all new assassin named Connor who's 30 year tale will take him through the American Revolution and beyond. CGM had a chance to pick the brains of some members of the *Assassin's Creed* team about their upcoming game and how they went about transplanting the series to a whole new continent.

Comics & Gaming Magazine: Can you tell us how the combat experience in *AC3* will be different from previous games in the series?

Alexander Hutchinson (Creative Director): It was a huge challenge to find the right balance between changing the game enough to keep it fresh and exciting, and to make it attractive and easy for new players to jump on board while making sure that everyone who has been with us since *AC1* was satisfied. We had endless meetings, lunch time discussions, after work arguments over beer, until we realized that what we wanted to do was to treat it like a new IP built around the pillars of the *AC* franchise, which still obeyed all of the core narrative rules of the brand, and fit within the established fiction.

We kept the idea that the gameplay was built around navigation, combat and social stealth, but we completely changed the way they were built and how the player would use them. We wanted a new assassin and a brand new time period, but we wanted them to fit into the history of the brand, so the character didn't need to be aware of the brand history but players could understand him as part of a lineage.

We believe that *AC3* is the perfect point for new players to join the franchise, but we're also happy that long-time fans will be able to look below the surface and find many references to previous games and a new perspective on the *AC* mythos.

Combat is now dual handed, with all close combat weapons such as the tomahawk or war club, as well as new ranged weapons like flintlock pistols. But more importantly we rebuilt the way you play, so there's deeper strategy and more satisfying kill chains as well. It's a completely new system, so everything is new. We wanted players to be more aggressive, so we changed block into a parry, and then used counter moves as a window to deeper strategies: if you time your counter correctly, you then have a small window of slowdown to choose to kill them, throw them or disarm them. Your goal once you've killed your initial opponent is then to string as many kills together as possible by both initiating attacks and responding correctly to attacks from different archetypes. We've also dedicated a button to 'tools', which means you can combo pistols and your main attacks with ease without having to switch gear mid fight.

CGM: How does momentum, speed, and movement factor into the combat?

AH: We wanted to create a character who was always on the move, and was able to kill while running, and then string those kills together so we created what we call a 'running assassinate' which can be performed with any weapon as well as the hidden blade. It's a philosophy we extended into the main combat, as you can begin with a running assassinate, then switch to your normal combat as soon as enemies recognise you.

CGM: What changes did the team need to make to the free running / traversal mechanics to support the new setting and environment?

AH: Our goal was to create a character as capable in the wilderness as previous assassins were in city environments. Our goal was to completely rebuild the climbing system from the ground up, not just with completely new animations, but also with brand new functionality. Connor can move through complex branch and tree formations easily, and can pause at any time to assassinate targets from above. He can climb cliffs and uneven stone surfaces using new moves we patterned on real world climbing techniques, allowing us to build natural landmarks to work alongside the city landmarks in the game.

He can also free run and climb on moving surfaces for the first time, so expect windmills, moving logs and more which allows us to create fresh puzzles and challenges for the player.

CGM: How open ended will objectives be? Will it simply be a binary choice of stealth vs. direct or will players be able to approach situations in many different ways?

AH: We've tried as much as possible to offer the player options: so there are several missions where you have a global goal of eliminating certain guards, or freeing certain captives or whatever, and then you can use the tools and strategies that you prefer. On the other side of the coin, in missions that are very driven by story or history, where events really played out in a specific order we control you a little more. We also use the new expanded 'constraint' system to push people toward more 'assassin-like' behaviour. So while we let people pass the mission by just killing everyone, we have constraints that ask you to only kill your target or to never be seen for example, which really add challenge and change radically change the tone of the mission.

CGM: Since the American frontier is somewhat of an untamed wilderness, will there be interactions members of other aboriginal nations, or other NPC factions in addition to encounters with animals?

AH: Yes, Connor is Mohawk so you will interact with his tribe – but revealing anything further is spoiler territory.

CGM: Can you tell me about the hunting system and how the in-game economy will work?

AH: Hunting can be done anywhere at any time. The animals are all over the frontier in the game, and some parts of the city. They are not random, as they're based on specific locations the player can explore and that is grounded in reality – they'll be in their habitat, but their behaviour is systemic. You can hunt them, or avoid them, and depending on how you kill them they spawn different types of items. The gathered items can then be used in side quests, clubs or in trade.

As for the specifics of the economic system, you'll have to wait a little bit longer before we can reveal its scope.

CGM: Were there any specific challenges that came with adapting colonial American cities to the core gameplay experience?

AH: So many! Sloped roofs change the way you navigate; the uneven terrain of the frontier filled with trees and cliffs required an entirely new climbing system; the addition of muskets and flintlock pistols meant we needed to adapt the combat system to make that a part of fight, even as we rebuilt the whole strategy of the fight itself; animals in the frontier were a huge task, and we built over two dozen unique animals with unique behaviours; we felt we couldn't ignore winter in this setting, and it was a huge challenge to make it work everywhere, affect gameplay and not be restricted only to mountaintops; and obviously naval battles in this period were very unique, and it took a whole dedicated team several years to bring them to the level they're at right now.

CGM: What can you tell me about the research process? Boston and New York are very different today than they were in colonial times. How did the team go about maintaining historical accuracy and authenticity, and what challenges did the team face while maintaining accuracy?

AH: We spent a big chunk of the early development of all of our games on historical research: reading books, watching documentaries, searching the Internet, etc. We also have historians on staff and hire consultants for specific roles. On *AC3* we have a cultural advisor from the local Native American community who helps us with accuracy and language. Then, once we have a

base of "fact" we weave our story into it, again checking back both with documents and historians, to make sure our fiction is supportable enough to make it fun and interesting for players.

CGM: Multiplayer is making a return, can you tell me how the experience will be different in *AC3*?

Damien Kieken (Multiplayer Game Director): *Assassin's Creed III* takes place before, during and after the American Revolution, mainly in the British colonies Boston, New York and the Frontier. Therefore, one of the key focus for the multiplayer team was to create unique maps based on the revolutionary war setting that are different from past *AC* MP maps and fun to discover and play with and against friends! Of course, apart from unique maps, we had to create a wide array of characters that are inspired by this setting and that will resonate with the players! A new featured introduced in *AC3* is the dynamic weather system. While you play your session, it might start snowing all of a sudden. This will affect gameplay as the visibility will be altered and will require the player to adapt his play.

Another key element we focused on was on developing new game modes based around team play and competition. We revealed one new mode at E3 called Domination which is a team based mode, 4 vs. 4, where players need to work together to attack/capture and defend various zones on a map to score points. It's the famous multiplayer mode based on zone capturing with the *AC* MP twist. This mode introduces a whole new dynamic in *Assassin's Creed* multiplayer.

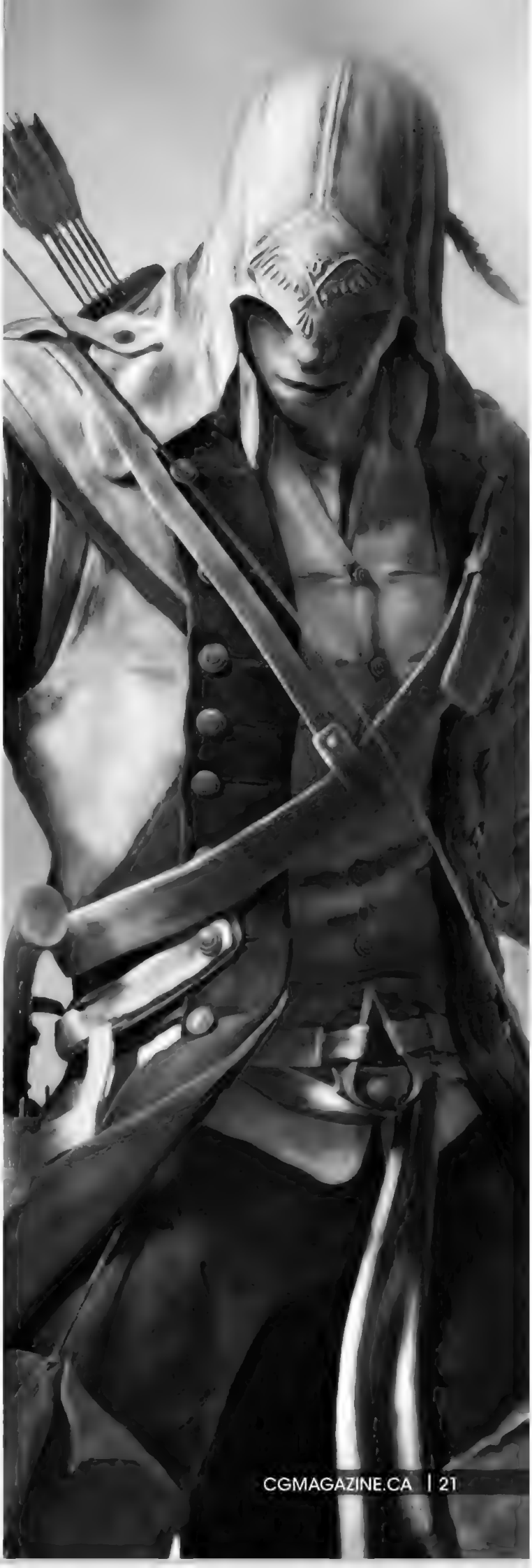
CGM: What say about Wolfpack mode?

DK: Wolfpack is a 1-to-4 players versus AI mode... In this mode every second counts as you need to hunt AI targets... A fast paced experience which rewards flawless navigation and quick reactions before the clock ends.

Finally, we are always working on refining the overall multiplayer experience. Data tracking and feedback from *AC Brotherhood* and *Revelations* players have helped us in improving our core mechanics as well as working on the overall performance of matchmaking and group system. Now, kill and stun interactions are merged on to the same button (to stop having the game revealing the pursuer and to improve player reactivity), thanks to a third ability slot, you can play with three active abilities at the same time and we have a brand new 'player focused flow'.

CGM: Will players be able to experience "wolfpack" mode locally, online or both?

DK: Locally, you will be able to play the Wolfpack mode alone. Online, you will be able to play with friends or strangers up to four players in a session. CG



The Assassin's Creed Primer

Nothing Is Straightforward. All Things Are Confusing

Words by Wayne Santos

Assassin's Creed is one of the more unique franchises to come out of the current generation of consoles. It's also one of the most convoluted, with a plot that stretches back before the dawn of civilization to a world currently in the control of one of the great secret societies of modern conspiracy theory. There's betrayals, there's advanced digital technology that reads racial memory encoded in DNA, and there's even possession of nervous systems in order to kill people. And on top of all that, you've got protagonists that spend most of their time running around on roof-tops killing people with little blade that slides out of their wristband.

How does any of this make any kind of reasonable sense? We weren't sure either, so we put it all in perspective with this little primer to get you up to speed on where we stand at the start of *Assassin's Creed III*. It should be understood at this point that if you haven't played the previous four games, massive, massive spoilers follow.

The Good Guys

The story of *Assassin's Creed* starts in the year 2012, with Desmond Miles, a bartender in New York who finds himself kidnapped and put in a cell for experimentation. The tests are repeated in a high tech bed known as the Animus that allows the exploration of the ancestral memories of the subject, literally re-living the lives previous descendants. Desmond's selection isn't random; he is the runaway child of a "tribe" of assassins that, like the gypsies of Europe, have been living a nomadic existence off the grid as they fight an old enemy. That enemy continues to experiment on Desmond, until fellow members of the Assassin Order rescue him. Both parties are interested in the same thing; the data locked in his ancestral memories.

Through the use of the Animus, Desmond—and the players—are introduced to two more pivotal figures in history. There's Altaïr ibn-La'Ahad an early assassin from the 12th century that was pivotal in giving the future generations of assassins their direction and purpose. Another important ancestor is Ezio Auditore da Firenze, an assassin of the 15th century Renaissance period. He starts out in *AC2* with the seemingly sole purpose of playing the genetic "errand boy" for delivering a message to Desmond 600 years in the future for an ancient, advanced race of humans. But he is also responsible for fending off the villainous attempts to hold sway over Rome, the Catholic church and even the Byzantine kingdom of Constantinople, which brings us to our next important element.

The Bad Guys

Most classic stories are about the clash between good and evil, and the *Assassin's Creed* series is no different. The only real wrinkle here is that the evil spans generations, and takes a nod from classic conspiracy theory. The main antagonists here are the Templar Knights, although they'd been in operation for centuries before the name was given. By the time we hit the year 2012—which is when part of the story takes place—they have morphed into the megacorporation Abstergo Industries.

Before they became the Templar Knights, the group came to the early decision that the only way to ensure the continued prosperity of humanity was through total control and order, with the Templars themselves overseeing all this, of course. As a result, they frequently clashed with the Assassin's Order that valued individuality and dynamic, spontaneous progression. It was only after the group decided they needed official

recognition for greater mobility and influence around the world that they sought the blessing of the church and became known as the Templar Knights. The years passed, religion lost its influence, and by the time we hit the 20th century, the Templars had abandoned religion in favour of two new forces; capitalism and technology. Forming Abstergo Industries in 1937 as their "corporate face" they influenced and controlled everything from World War II to the American elections of 2000.

And over the course of all these centuries, they fought the assassins and orchestrated massive conspiracies not to control the world—although that was ultimately their goal—but to manoeuvre themselves into better positions for the tools that would allow this to happen.

What Everyone Is Fighting For

At the heart of the conflict between the Assassin Order and the Templars/Abstergo is a struggle to control ancient technology. This technology is known as "Pieces of Eden," from the "First Civilization," an advanced race of humanoids that are responsible for the genetic engineering and mass production of humanity itself.

The First Civilization look nearly identical to humans, which should come as no surprise considering the old "made in his image" maxim that even humans follow in our own endeavours to create robots and other forms of life. The key difference is they were monumentally smarter and had more advanced evolutionary traits, including a temporal sixth sense that they didn't build into humans when they created us. Unfortunately for them, because humans were so great at so many tasks, they created millions of us, and when the typical human resentment of slavery kicked in, a revolution, led by Adam and Eve and using a piece of Eden, was a rousing success. Humanity threw off the yoke of oppression and was immediately pushed to the brink of extinction by a massive solar flare that the First Civilization had been trying to prevent, but had been too busy dealing with a rebellion to properly address. The end result was that the few surviving members of the First Civilization dedicated themselves rebuilding a new world, for and with humanity. Meanwhile, humans, breeding like rabbits, went on to replace—and in some cases interbreed with—the First Civilization survivors viewing the rare contact they had with their dying creators as brushes with gods.

The technologies the First Civilization left behind, the "Pieces of Eden," are various artifacts with differing functions. Some pieces, like one known as "the sword" have been wielded by famous leaders like King Arthur and Attila the Hun to great military effect, others, like the crystal skulls distributed throughout South America, were communication devices that enabled true telepathy. The pieces of Eden that the Templars are most focused on, are the ones that involve mind control, indoctrination and subjugation of the human mind. Over the centuries, the Templars have clashed again and again with the assassins to gain possession of these specific pieces of Eden, as they view them to be the fastest, most efficient way to gain total control over humanity.

By the time we arrive at the 21st century, the Templars, as Abstergo, have most of the documented pieces of Eden in possession, and have relegated the assassins to a small, fringe group with little of the political influence that the Templars now enjoy. Through the Templars favourite tactic of mind control, they have even created sleeper agents that have done a great job of

infiltrating assassin enclaves and flushing them out, keeping their enemies weak, scattered and on the run.

However, it all seems to be for naught as, unbeknownst to the Templars, the rescue of Desmond Miles wasn't just a minor inconvenience. Although the Templars wanted him for his memories of Altaïr, and the location of many other pieces of Eden, his later memories—after being rescued by what's left of the Assassin's Order—reveal far more important information. In the memories of Ezio Audtiore, it is revealed that the First Civilization, thanks to their sixth sense of temporal awareness, know that another life-annihilating solar flare is going to ignite in the 21st century. Through Ezio's embedded ancestral memories, they are able to reach out to Desmond, finally revealing their presence and warning him that this time, there is no advanced race in charge of the planet to blunt the effects and allow small pockets of humanity to continue.

So while the Templars are slowly closing the noose on the assassins in order to enjoy the demise of their greatest the foe, the assassins themselves are feverishly working to locate the central vault, a repository for First Civilization research. Desmond, making contact with yet another First Civilization remnant in *Assassin's Creed: Revelations*, was told that while the First Civilization failed in their attempts to stop the solar flare, but he, somehow, may have a key to preventing this new one. In order to effect this new solution, he must reach the central vault of the First Civilization with whatever mysterious new information he has within him and after that... who knows?

Assassin's Creed III

So now, when our story picks up again in the third game, this is what we're left with. Desmond's communication with the First Civilization remnant revealed that the Central Vault's location is somewhere in the wilds of upstate New York. Not coincidentally, Desmond Miles is about to experience a third trip into the Animus, this time to live the life of the British/Native American assassin Ratonhnhaké:ton or, for the British that he eventually ends up fighting, Connor Kenway.

Ubisoft has been keeping quiet about any further plot developments relating to Connor's historical adventure and how that ties in with Desmond's race against the fabled 2012 doomsday prediction. What is known is that it's all converging on America and the odds are that Desmond and Connor's story will wrap up with some kind of finale surrounding the Templars, the and last push for survival by the beleaguered Assassin Order. The big question most people probably have is, how is a bartender with assassin's DNA supposed to save the Earth from an extinction level event solar flare? We're just a few months away from finding out now. C&G

Reuse and Recycle

The Death of Originality in Mainstream Comics

Words by Adam Carter

Look at that stack of comic books on your shelf. Think about it – how many of the characters in those pages were created in the last ten years? Probably very few – and that lack of originality is part of a problem that's killing mainstream comics.

Batman or *Superman*? *The Joker* or *Two Face*? They were all created in the late 30s and early 40s. *Spider-Man* or the *X-Men*? *The Avengers*? They all showed up in the early 1960s.

But as the Summer of Love waned, superheroes that seemed to stick in public consciousness all but vanished. Sure, the 80s had the prolific *Watchmen* and characters like Venom. And Deadpool, Bane and Spawn were created in the 90s.

But think about the turn of the century onwards – how many of your favourite characters debuted since the year 2000? Outside of *Invincible* or maybe the kids in *Avengers Academy*, things are pretty bare. And is it really that likely we'll be mentioning those names in the same breath as *Spider-Man* in 30 years?

All tapped out

What we see today is a startling lack of creativity. Years ago, classic characters like the *Fantastic Four* or *Spider-Man* were born out of original, wacky ideas.

But now, mainstream superhero comics seem more content to play it safe and rehash the past. *Ultimate Marvel*? A way to freshen up classic characters we already love. The *New 52*? Pretty much the same thing, but on a wider scale. The forthcoming *Marvel Now!* initiative? Just shuffling around creators on the same characters – and largely creators already working for Marvel, no less.

Think about it – DC reboots continuity for the *New 52*, and starts everything from scratch. What's the first thing the Justice League does? They fight each other because of a misunderstanding, one of the most overused an hackneyed superhero plots of all time.

Once they're through with their bickering and team up (as is always the inevitable conclusion to these sorts of things) who do they fight? Darkseid. Darkseid, who is quite possibly the most overused villain in the DC universe, and most especially when the Justice League is concerned. How is this breaking new ground?

Sure, they gave Superman a new costume. That's the equivalent to slapping a new coat of paint on an aging minivan.

Then consider the *Marvel Now!* relaunch. Who are *Captain America* and the *Avengers* set to square off with? The Red Skull...again. And Iron Man? He'll be dealing with Extremis and the theft of his technology – two of the most commonly used storylines ever connected with the character.

Replay, rehash, reuse.

BANG, You're Dead

And then there's death.

Death is a tricky, scary thing – unless you're a comic book character.

Death is the most overused and hackneyed of all superhero tropes in the last 25 years – it means virtually nothing. There are no consequences attached to superhero death, as it's expected the character will be resurrected – and lately, in record time.

It's all Superman's fault. His death and subsequent return forever destroyed the concept of death in comics.

Since then, the Flash came back. So did Animal Man. And Daredevil. Colossus got sick, but got better – even though he was suffering from the obvious handicap of being dead. Elektra was skewered and resurrected. Donna Troy showed up. The Green Goblin came back to taunt Spider-Man. The Green Lantern returned after murdering half the Green Lantern Corps. And Doomsday came back to fight a resurrected Superman – again, and again, and again.

And in a stroke of vivid imagination by both DC and Marvel, both Captain America and Batman died at about the same time a couple of years back. Then they both came back – fighting their way through time in almost the exact same way.

To top it off in a bona-fide post-modern moment, Superman even "prays for a resurrection" when the Martian Manhunter dies during *Final Crisis*. Even the characters themselves are in on the joke by now.

Is it any wonder readers don't care about death? It's meaningless.

And that's part of the problem – if no one really dies, why bother creating new, interesting characters? Why not just recycle them?

But Is It Our Fault?

No doubt this is a problem. But are readers the root of the issue? It's very likely we are the cause of this never-ending deluge of regurgitation.

We don't rush to embrace new characters – sales are indicative of that. And in a market of uncertainty and economic strife, one can't fault companies for sticking with what they know will sell.

That's why DC produces so many *Batman* titles, and every second Marvel book has Wolverine in it. Those are the titles we buy – and sales drive everything. Comic companies would be more inclined to take risks if people gave them a chance.

But we don't, because we want to see Batman fight the Joker, and we want to see Wolverine slice things up all the time. So that's what we get – at the expense of originality.

Look Outside The Mainstream

But for all the rampant rehashing seen in superhero comics today, there's plenty of great stuff outside the mainstream.

Originality in comics as a medium isn't waning – in fact, it's stronger than ever. Creator owned titles and indie books step way outside the norm with wild and imaginative stories. From the dystopian nightmare of Jeff Lemire's *Sweet Tooth* to pseudo-journalism like Josh Neufeld's New Orleans *After the Deluge*, there are countless titles trying new and inventive things. But usually, they don't feature superheroes.

It could be that the age of superheroes is dying. Years ago, companies wouldn't dream of publishing something that wasn't a western, or a romance book. Now, they're nowhere to be seen – and there could come a time when that happens to superheroes, should every available storyline be tapped out.

But that shouldn't be the case. There should still be plenty of life kicking in these characters.

So creators and publishers: don't be afraid to take risks. Try new things – it's the only thing that can keep the genre fresh and interesting.

And readers: when companies do go out on a limb, support them. They cater to your buying habits – so put your money where your mouth is, and give them the ability to really get creative.

Or do we really want to see the death and return of Superman for the umpteenth time? C&G

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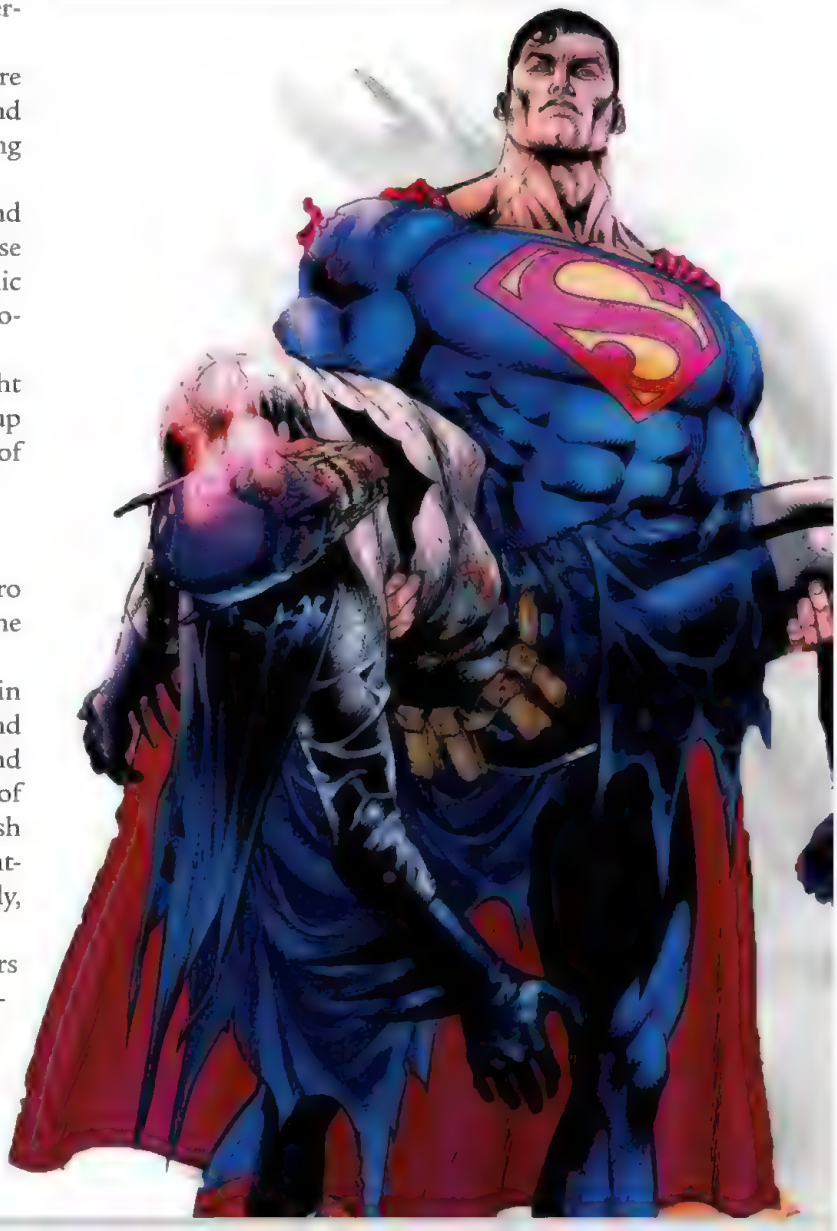

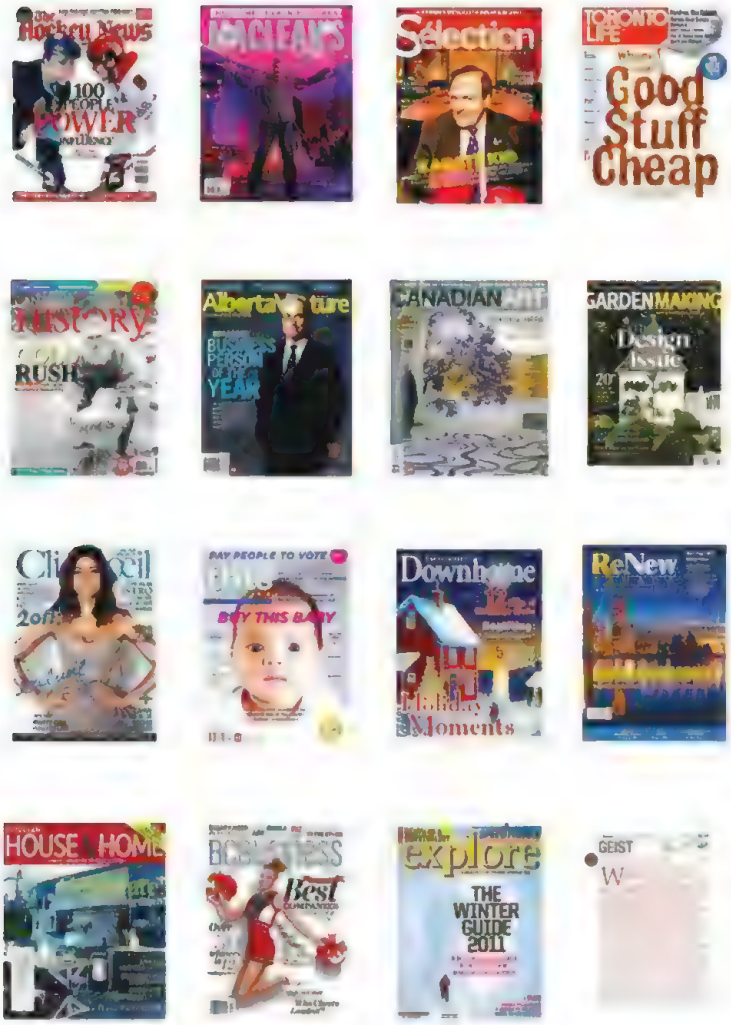

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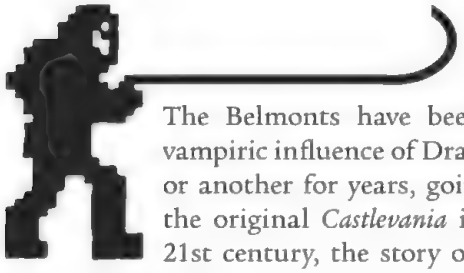
Castlevania: Mirror of Fate

A Preview of When Things Get Dark

Words by Wayne Santos



The Belmonts have been fighting the vampiric influence of Dracula in one way or another for years, going way back to the original *Castlevania* in 1986. In the 21st century, the story of the Belmonts took a new turn with a reboot to the series that is telling the story in a different way for new platforms. *Castlevania: Mirror of Fate* is the next step in that story, although this time, the game is coming to the 3DS, instead of the consoles that the original *Lords of Shadow* debuted on.

It's All In The Family

The story of the Belmont family has gotten darker and more tragic with this reimagining of the series. Over the course of the DLC that has been released in the wake of *Castlevania: Lords of Shadow* in 2010, the hero, Gabriel Belmont has taken a turn for a worse. Having lost everything he cared about in the original game, he's subsequently lost faith in all his belief systems, resorted to becoming a vampire in order to defeat a great evil, and has now fully embraced his condition and renamed himself Dracula. So yeah, in this new version of the *Castlevania* story, Dracula is actually a man who became more and more powerful to defeat greater and darker evils, ultimately becoming a great evil himself when he lost faith in what he was doing.

Now, *Mirror of Fate*, 26 years have passed since Gabriel's fall, and it's time to eliminate the new evil known as Dracula. The unfortunate hero that this duty falls to is none other than Trevor Belmont of the Brotherhood of Light. Yes, the *same* Brotherhood that the disillusioned Gabriel eventually abandoned when he realized they'd inadvertently created the great evil that was plaguing the world. And yes, this Trevor is actually the son he didn't know he had by the wife he was manipulated into killing and failed to resurrect. You just know that in a game with an over arching goal of patricide, there's no way that this will be a happy, fluffy ending.

One of the interesting things that Konami has revealed about the game is that while you start with Trevor Belmont, he's not the only character you play. The game apparently spans across generations, and players will take control of Trevor's son Simon Belmont and another vampire hunter, with the familiar name of Alucard later in the game. All of this is focused on revealing more of the story about the fall of the first Belmont, leading up to an official console sequel, *Castlevania: Lords of Shadow 2* which has already been slated for a 2013 release on the Xbox 360 and PlayStation 3. In that regard, this seems a bit like the choice Square Enix made to release the intermediary game *Kingdom Hearts: Chain of Memories* on the GameBoy even though *Kingdom Hearts* and the sequel *Kingdom Hearts 2* both appeared on the PS2. Hopefully MercurySteam, the developers, won't fall into the trap of having a fragmented, difficult to follow narrative because of this, something that comics, and even games like *Assassin's Creed* have suffered from as a result of scattering their narrative across different media and DLC.

Vampire Hunting In 3D

Because the game is debuting on the 3DS, it will surprise absolutely no one that you can play it in 3D, a feature that seems to be less relevant as time goes by, but hey, it's there. The most pressing concern for the game is how is it going to play?

For fans of the original *Castlevania* series, there may be a small sigh of relief at seeing the gameplay in action. Even though this game is based on the new series, and even though it's obviously being done with polygons and not sprites to better showcase the 3D effect, this is

One has to question the wisdom of bringing the latest instalment of a console series to a platform that doesn't actually have the series available to it.

more of a "2.5D" experience as seen in other, more recent side-scrolling games like *Rochard* and *El Shaddai: Ascension of the Metatron*. The camera occasionally zooms and pans for more dramatic angles—usually to introduce a new, powerful foe—but the actual gameplay itself is the classic left-to-right whip snapping action that old school fans are more familiar with, rather than the third-person action game more reminiscent of *Devil May Cry* that the new series—at least on consoles—is based on.

One way in which *Mirror of Fate* does follow the roots of the new franchise is in the combat with some of the bosses. In *Lords of Shadow*, certain bosses took on gigantic proportions, calling for an environmental puzzle solving element that was reminiscent of Wander's antics in *Shadow of the Colossus*. Gigantic bosses like this will be making a return of some kind to the side-scrolling action of *Mirror of Fate*, though Konami's not spilling many details on these particular fights.

As with most action games these days, there's an RPG-lite element at work here, where XP can be gained and spent on new combos for more versatility in combat. The combat itself is what you'd expect from a classic *Castlevania* game; a lot of jumping to dodge and whipping to inflict damage. There are also different weapons/tools that the Belmonts can acquire to help with the quest, like boomerangs for ranged and aerial attacks. And one new addition the move to polygons allows is—for better or worse—the inclusion of *God of War* style gory finishes for certain enemies. They don't require an elaborate series of button presses to pull off, but occasionally the camera will zoom in to show your hero enact a pretty dramatic killing blow to bring the fight to an end.

Castlevania: Mirror of Fate is looking like a decent, portable addition to the new series so far. But one has to question the wisdom of bringing the latest instalment of a console series to a platform that doesn't actually have the series available to it. 360 and PS3 owners may not own a 3DS, and so could potentially miss out on crucial bits of story that would enrich their enjoyment of the franchise when the sequel arrives next year. Conversely, if you have a 3DS, but not a 360 or a PS3, then having an intermediary game that sits between two big stories might dissuade some people from picking the game up. How all this pans out remains to be seen, but the game itself is slated for release later this fall. CG

San Diego Comic-Con 2012

The Aftermath

Words by Wayne Santos

When you've got a magazine that calls itself Comics & Gaming, you can safely bet that when one major event in on medium gets coverage, so does the other. The Electronic Entertainment Expo has come and gone, and now the same can be said for the San Diego Comic-Con. Of course, unlike E3, SDCC is about considerably more than just a focus on its preferred medium. There are movie announcements, game announcements, a veritable league of developments, some of which are only tangentially related to comics, but they all happen in San Diego, and now it's time to round up some of the biggest news to come out this year.

Deadpool Gets A Game

One of big announcements for fans of both comics and gaming is that gleefully disturbed Deadpool is going to be getting his own game. He's made appearances previously in other franchises like the *X-Men Legends* and *Marvel Ultimate Alliance* series, but his popularity has grown enough that someone decided it was a good idea to cut him loose all on his own.

The game continues the High Moon studios trend of working on licensed properties. High Moon has just finished and released it latest title, *Transformers: Fall of Cybertron*, which is the sequel to one of the few comic/cartoon based games that's managed to disappoint tremendously. It will be interesting to see if the studio is up to the task of taking on a more contemporary, popular comic book character. People had all but given up hope on Rocksteady giving Batman a decent interactive outing, but they surprised everyone with the amazing *Batman: Arkham Asylum*. Hopefully they're not the only studio capable of doing justice to comic book characters. Things that point to a promising start include Daniel Way—a regular writer on the series—penning the game script, and, to the surprise of no one, Nolan North being tapped to reprise his role as Deadpool, a role he's played in previous game appearances.

Guardians of the Galaxy Hitting The Big Screen

In more Marvel news—actually, it was a pretty good year for Marvel all around—the surprise announcement was the recently rebooted super hero team the *Guardians of the Galaxy* getting their own movie. This is, to say the least, a baffling but brave choice. The *Guardians of the Galaxy* was a group that originally debuted in 1969, appeared in a few Marvel issues here and there, finally got their own series in the 90s that ran for 62 issues, and then got resurrected again in 2008. It's the new team that is getting their own movie, and it's going to be interesting to see how what kind of CG trickery they come up with for Rocket Racoon, one of the pivotal characters who, of course, happens to be a bipedal, walking, talking, shooting racoon.

The writers have their work cut out for them. Between the complexity of bringing a team together for the first time, and the dilemma of each of them having a fully developed story—try explaining Gamora's baroque background without an entire freakin' movie or two to do it—there's going to be a lot information to be carefully selected and painfully cut. Hopefully the purists will take to it the same way they have for other films that featured big icons like Captain America and Iron Man. And, just to make things even more complicated, this new film is set to belong in the movie continuity known as the Marvel Cinematic Universe, in which the movie Avengers currently exist. This, in no way, shape, or form, sounds like it's going to be an easy task, but Marvel certainly gets points for trying.

The *Sandman* is regularly cited as one of the single greatest series in the history of the medium

Quentin Tarantino To Write A Comic

This is one of those ideas that seems so obvious in retrospect you have to wonder why it took so long to happen. Film fans are well aware of Tarantino's geeky obsessions, from his humble beginnings as a video store clerk meticulously discussing film to his trademark dialogue that discusses the minutiae of pop culture, like the Kirby Silver Surfer being the one true Silver Surfer. It feels a bit like a good idea that's long overdue that he has formally announced he's going to be writing a comic.

Well, maybe not "formally"; there wasn't anything formal about Jim Lee busting into a *Before Watchmen* panel to usher in Quentin Tarantino, who then rapidly confessed that he regretted all the cuts he had to make to movies, but wouldn't have to do that with his new comic project for DC. That might not be the most elegant way to make an announcement, but it sure is official. There's no word on what the project is going to be, but you can bet that in a summer ruled by Marvel this is some welcome good news for DC. And speaking of good news.

Neil Gaiman Writes A New *Sandman* Miniseries

This, without a doubt, is the biggest news of the SDCC. Neil Gaiman quickly went from a cult hit to one of the biggest urban/fantasy/comic writers of our time. *The Sandman* is regularly cited as one of the single greatest series in the history of the medium and not just by fans or critics of the medium itself but by scholars and other critics in the mainstream. *The Sandman* is one of the most widely read comics on the planet and has secured a place for itself in the medium as one the high watermarks for quality, intelligence and originality. So respectful is the industry of Gaiman's work that when he brought the series to a close, DC—even though they legally own the property—never took the next logical step of just assigning another writer to it and continuing on in perpetuity; even they knew it wouldn't be right.

Which makes it all the more impressive when Neil Gaiman explained—via a video press statement played at the con—that he's coming back for one more round. This isn't a sequel, but instead is going to a be prequel, explaining the exact circumstances behind why Dream, the protagonist of the series, was in such a weakened, vulnerable state, thus making it possible for him to be captured and send the entire series off on its languorous, spiralling start. J. H. Williams III, best known for his work on *Promethea*, *Desolation Jones* and *Batwoman* is going to be handling art chores on the new six issue miniseries. It's pretty much a foregone conclusion at this point that the sales on the trade paperback edition will be monstrous. CG

The Emerald Knight Puts on Ruby Slippers

The Green Lantern comes out with a bang

Words by Philip Cabral

I listen to the news on the way to work and the announcer says that DC comics is re-introducing the Green Lantern, Alan Scott of Earth 2 as a gay character. My first reaction... '*whatever*'. Whatever, in a very indifferent way. My thoughts initially go to the actual character; he's a Green Lantern, Justice Society of America's Green Lantern, not the real Green Lantern - Hal Jordon that I grew up with. He may be the original Green Lantern, but definitely not the most widely known. I haven't read very many comics about him, since I grew up in the latter half of the Silver Age and did not follow the revamp of the Justice Society's characters a few years ago. In fact I don't know much about his personality either. I find I kind of place most of the DC heroes of that era together in a lumpy mass of war time, good guy, chummy heroes with bad costumes.

A few days later I'm walking with some co-workers to the café to get coffee. One turns to me and asks "Hey, is Green Lantern gay?" They know I'm a comic book fan, and have been collecting most of my life; ritualistically showing up at my comic shop every Wednesday for my weekly fix; but they don't know I'm gay. Instantly I respond, "No he's not. That's another old Green Lantern. They are making him gay in another universe." The next few steps get me thinking... I instinctively diverted the conversation as a reflex from being in the closet most of my life. In those few words I reassure the 'straight people' that it's insignificant, nothing to worry about and end the topic before anyone I genuinely like says something I might find offensive.

Why is DC comics making Alan Scott a gay character? Why is it not an "A" list character? Why is it in another universe? I reframe from reading other people's opinion, until I make up my own mind. I wonder if this is just a media ploy to get DC and the comic into the news, build up hype and boost sales, then I wonder if the sales would actually increase that much just because he is gay? I had flipped through the comic when I saw it on the rack, so it caught my attention, but I didn't buy it until I was asked to write my opinion. I was asked how the gay community felt about it. Well I don't profess to speak for the entire gay community, that would be like saying I was going to speak for all the Caucasians in the world, but I *do* have something to say...

I knew I was gay back in high school and was totally in the closet. Back then it was very simple to me. Being gay is wrong, you don't want to be gay, they can get AIDS, you'll lose everyone you care about and we'll throw in...You'll burn in Hell. It was easy enough for me to cover up, I'm the comic book geek, masculine acting and odd, but in a good way. I collected *Alpha Flight* and loved Marvel's Canadian team. My favourite character was Puck (and not in a bear loving way). I also had no clue at the time that Northstar was gay. The references in the early issues were too vague and I was young. Then *Alpha Flight #106* came out (*pun intended*) and Northstar announced he was gay. Wow, a gay superhero and in one of my favourite comic. It didn't change my world and I wasn't looking up to him as a role model, but it was *nice*. The more exposure and the more homosexual people where seen in the public eye, the quicker people would come to be more accepting, I hoped. Later I remember reading John Byrne saying something along the lines of how he was unhappy at how Marvel handled the whole coming out thing. He had found out that homosexuality was seen in the animal kingdom and considered it a natural thing. Therefore to him, Northstar was always just acting normal and there would never be a coming out moment. All of Marvel's superheroes have personalities and character traits, I just considered this to be one of Northstar's, along with being a snob and jerk.

This reaches into the topic of whether or not homosexual celebrities should reveal their sexual orientation to the public as a role model and inspiration to younger gay youth. I find that although it is important that people in the public eye reveal their sexual orientation, if they wish to do so, it has become more accepted now, and not met with as much shock and scandal. There is still the need for gay people to be out in the open, so that it does not fade away back into the closet.

Now back to our friend Alan Scott. Yeah, he's Green Lantern, he's a rich good looking celebrity business man, and yes on an alternate Earth he is gay. Which also makes you wonder about his daughter (Jade) and son's (Obsidian) possible story lines. It's nice that there is a leading character who's gay, but it is all going to depend on what they do with him. He's not flaming, so there isn't the stereotype. I doubt that DC will change him into a cutting edge rebel championing the gay agenda (*whatever that is*). Is he going to be the acceptable gay image so that the straight majority doesn't get offended? What I hope they do is just write an interesting story for him with good character development and he just happens to date men.

'Green Lantern is gay', may be an eye catching headline, with collateral damage of people questioning Ryan Reynolds, but I believe it will just be another blip on the gay-dar. To the masses it will fade away, and to the comic book fans it will just be accepted as long as the story line is good. Should we fear a Comic Book Code revolution from somewhere in the United States to rise up and stop the corruption of our vulnerable youth? I doubt it. C&G

I doubt that DC will change him [Alan Scott] into a cutting edge rebel championing the gay agenda (*whatever that is*).

You might know **Joshua**. He loves video games, and he owns enough to know they're not all meant for kids. That's why he reminds his friends (at least the ones that have kids) that they all have big black letters on the box to help parents find the ones that are best for their families.

You can learn about those ratings at **ESRB.org.**

Los Angeles, CA

ESRB ENTERTAINMENT SOFTWARE RATING BOARD

THE SKETCHY LEGACY OF PRO SKATER
WORDS BY TIM ASHDOWN

Dropping in

The idea for a skateboarding videogame was pitched to Tony Hawk himself in 1997 by an unknown software developer. According to Hawk's autobiography, *How Did I Get Here? The Ascent of An Unlikely CEO*, he and this mysterious development partner began to shop the idea around to various publishers, including Nintendo and Midway. According to Hawk, those first few meetings were "resoundingly discouraging." They were told that "skateboarding wasn't popular enough" and that "skate tricks wouldn't translate to videogame controls." Oh how wrong they were. If Hawk had brought me to those meetings, I can bet that I would have secured his first development deal. Why? Because when I was 14 years old, there were few things I loved more than skateboarding and videogames.

Wise beyond my years

My personal relationship with the *Pro Skater* series began long before the first game was even released. It was 1998 and I was in love with my Nintendo 64, particularly a game called *1080° Snowboarding*. One weekend while playing *1080°*, I began to muse how a skateboarding game would work using *1080°'s* controls as a jumping off point. I figured that the A button would do fine for ollies, and the C buttons found on the right side of the controller would be perfect for flip tricks, grabs and grinds. Being only fourteen with no formal game design knowledge, these ideas were just the basement musings of an adolescent youth. Little did I know that I had actually designed the controls for the first *Pro Skater* game in my head. The first *Pro Skater* game was released about a year and a half later for the Sony PlayStation. I'm not trying to take credit or anything, I just think it's neat that I probably came up with the same idea at around the same time as a bunch of software developers on the other side of the continent. And I have to give them credit, when I first picked up a controller to play *Pro Skater* I was shocked at how well the developers at Neversoft had realized my vision. Now where's my cheque?

Shopping around

Undeterred by those first meetings and convinced that the technology was available to create a skateboarding game, Hawk held on to the idea even after that first unknown developer had given up and wished him good luck. At this point Hawk began to get some encouraging phone calls – one call resulted in a meeting with Take-Two Interactive. Hawk says that while he liked what he saw from the *Grand Theft Auto* publisher, he was concerned that the publisher seemed uncertain about the game's direction. In September of 1998 Hawk received a call from a consultant in L.A who was working with Activision. He asked Hawk if he would meet with him and the developers at Neversoft who only had two games to their credit (*Skeleton Warriors* and *Apocalypse*) at this point. Neversoft was focused on designing the game for the Sony PlayStation, which made Hawk leery. While he realized that the PlayStation was the most popular console at the time, he preferred the N64 mainly for its graphics capabilities. His reservations aside, Hawk says that the meeting went well, and he was impressed by Neversoft's commitment to the sport. There were a lot of serious skaters at the studio and they seemed insistent that the game feature real skaters doing real tricks. Neversoft had also done their homework, and market research had found that skateboarding had the best marketing potential out of all the action sports. The engine being used was originally designed for Neversoft's second title *Apocalypse* which was a 3D "twin-stick" shooter starring Bruce Willis. Hawk found the controls to be intuitive and the engine to be "perfect for skateboarding". He felt that with his input it could be the best skateboarding game ever, and agreed to put his name on it.

The numbered sequels lasted until 2002, but even by that point it had started to stagnate.

Teenagers are evil

In 1999 I was in high school and living the free and fun filled life of a teenager. I would spend my days in class fantasizing about skateboarding and then running home to grab my board and hit the skatepark. At the time I was also dealing with a healthy obsession with videogames, so when I heard about *Tony Hawk's Pro Skater* I immediately decided that I absolutely had to play this game. There was one problem, I didn't have a PlayStation. So I did what any manipulative high schooler would do, I found someone who did and tried to become their friend. I didn't need anything long term, just a single invite to play after school. In retrospect it probably wasn't the nicest thing I've done in my life, but during those difficult high school years where threats and verbal abuse were part of my daily life, I didn't care much about what others thought. After school, we took turns playing some of the various stages and then played some split screen. I was amazed – Neversoft had nailed it. *THPS* was exactly what I wanted in a skateboarding game. Unfortunately, my "friend" got wise to my ploy and made a remark that I was only hanging out with him to play *Pro Skater*. I jokingly responded "Damn right!" He didn't laugh, but it didn't matter, I was hooked.

The good times and the bad.

The first *Pro Skater* game took the world by storm. Tony Hawk had been elevated to superstar status after landing the first 900° at the 1999 X-Games, which helped make the Tony Hawk brand as strong as ever. And now he had a best-selling videogame to boot. That strength would carry the series over the next 11 years, with Activision releasing a new instalment to the *Pro Skater* series each year. The numbered sequels lasted until 2002, but even by that point it had started to stagnate. The first four games were all excellent in their own time, but there was a lack of innovation from one game to the next. Neversoft tried to change things up in 2003 with *Tony Hawk's Underground*, moving away from goal-centric levels and focusing on other elements such as story and career development. In *Underground* the story centered around an unknown skater, and it was the player's task to progress the main character's career from unknown local to professional skateboarder. For me it was *Underground* where the series began to show signs of cracking. The game didn't look much better on the new generation of consoles, and while the gameplay was still what I'd come to love about the series I found this whole story idea unnecessary. I mean really, who played *Pro Skater* for the story? It was also troubling that *Underground* was the first videogame I was ever able to finish in one sitting. No bathroom breaks, no food, I just sat down, began to play, and four hours later I was done. I came away shocked that the game was so short, and it left me with a bad taste in my mouth. I felt that the developers had forgotten what the series was all about. Since I was so disappointed in *Tony Hawk's Underground*, I decided to skip the next entry in the series, *Tony Hawk's Underground 2*. The series didn't pique my interest again until I started seeing trailers for *Tony Hawk's Project 8*, which was the first game in the series to be designed for the current generation of consoles. Judging by the trailers, I thought the game looked amazing and might be a return to what made the series so successful in the first place. Sadly, once I got my hands on it I realized that I couldn't have been more wrong. Neversoft had dropped a few features to make the game more realistic. I found this move odd, as I had never envisioned *Pro Skater* to be any kind of realistic. Half the fun of the early titles was accomplishing tricks and lines that would have been absolutely impossible in reality. Also, there was that story thing again. In 2007 Activision released *Tony Hawk's Proving Ground*. *Proving Ground* attempted to immerse you in skate culture by pigeon holing skaters in to three different classes: the career skater, the rigger, and the hardcore skater. I had hoped that these different classes might make for some decent variety of gameplay, but they didn't. While some of the missions and goals were diverse, each class played exactly the same. I also thought that this was the worst looking game in the *Pro Skater* series, especially since there was now something to compare *Pro Skater* to.

The new kid in town

Skate was released by EA in 2007 in an attempt to unseat *Pro Skater* as the top skateboarding game. What EA did right was make the game completely about skating, and introduce a whole new control scheme. Imagine that - all EA had to do to bring about the downfall of the king of the genre was innovate. Gamers get bored easily, and part of the reason we play and buy game after game is that we're looking for new and exciting experiences. A new and exciting experience is exactly what *Skate* provided. Once *Skate* came on the market Activision decided maybe it was time to innovate. Since Neversoft had been working on the *Pro Skater* series for eight years, it's not surprising that they wanted a new challenge. Activision put them in charge of *Guitar Hero* and handed the reins of *Pro Skater* to Robomodo. This was a strange decision considering Robomodo was a new untested developer. Stranger still they were being given one of Activision's biggest brands. But since things had already started to go downhill with the series, a new developer could only make things better, right? Wrong. In 2009 Activision released *Tony Hawk: Ride* – effectively a reboot of the series featuring a skateboard peripheral which allowed you to stand on it to control your skater, an idea that apparently came from Tony Hawk himself. The game was released and universally panned by game critics. While they seemed to be on board with the new controls, critics said that there were too many technical issues with the game that couldn't be ignored, and that the overall execution of the controls was far from good. Despite the reviews, Robomodo was given a second chance with *Tony Hawk: Shred*, but by then the damage had been done and people weren't interested.

A legacy...

So that's how the mighty *Pro Skater* series soared to new heights only to bail, crash, and burn. However, all hope is not lost. Robomodo recently released their third entry in the *Pro Skater* series *Tony Hawk's Pro Skater HD* – an HD re-make of the first two *Pro Skater* games. While the game allows players to capture some of that nostalgic feeling from the golden years of the series, there are still a few technical issues – but nothing as terrible as *Tony Hawk: Ride*. The series has also returned to its roots, which I feel is something they should have done years ago. Is *THPSHD* the title that allows the *Pro Skater* phoenix to rise from the ashes of the series? I doubt it, but at least the series is returning to the formula that originally made it great – fun gameplay, a cool soundtrack, and good ol' fashioned skatin'. Tony Hawk should be proud of the legacy his games have left on the industry, but I wouldn't be so quick to rush back to a series that has provided so many disappointments just because I remember the good old days. C&G

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Future Proof

Preserving Videogames

Words by Reid McCarter

Every artist, at some point, thinks about how his or her work will be interpreted in the future. Whether or not a novel, album, film or painting will live on in posterity is something that has typically been determined by the quality of the art in question. Videogames, though, may be remembered or fade into obscurity for reasons other than their quality or importance to the history of the medium.

A book can be reprinted; a painting can be preserved or reproduced in prints; music and film have easily transferred from tape to disc to digital copies, but a game's survival depends on access to the hardware it was originally designed to be run on. This is all a bit scary: now that videogames have firmly embedded themselves in modern popular culture, being able to document them properly (i.e. being able to play them in their original form) is important for historians, sociologists, critics and enthusiasts alike.

The Side-Effects of Progress

Technology advances at breakneck speed, new hardware and software coming onto the market faster than most consumers can keep up with it. There are so many benefits that come with this kind of progress that it's often hard to think about the drawbacks that accompanies it. For videogame fans and critics the main problem that comes along with technological advancement is the issue of losing access to older titles.

Over the years I've bought or been given an Atari Lynx, Sega Game Gear, Nintendo 64, Sony PlayStation, Dreamcast, Game Boy, PlayStation 2, Wii, DS, Vita, any number of PCs and a PlayStation 3. I currently only own the last half of that list (with the PlayStation 2 relegated to a dusty storage closet) and, because of this, am limited in the videogames I can still actually play. As a games writer (and someone who loves good games, regardless of their age), not being able to easily go back to some of my favourite titles for reference or fun is a real bummer.

The loss of full backwards compatibility in the current generation (barring the Wii's GameCube support) has reinforced just how fleeting the ability to enjoy even relatively recent games is. The stacks of PlayStation 2 games that managed to survive being sold off during four years of post-secondary poverty still sit in a drawer, not guaranteed to play properly anymore. Even the PC, a platform that encourages flexibility, requires a large number of workarounds before allowing older videogames to be played. Getting classic titles — even those released ten or fifteen years ago — like *Thief*, *System Shock 2* or *Half-Life* to run properly on a modern Windows 7 machine takes a lot of effort without the guarantee of satisfactory results.

Videogames (and videogame fans), by always chasing after technological improvements, have ended up leaving the history of the medium to languish as a side effect of an abiding obsession with progress.

Emulation and Piracy

The most practical and convenient form of videogame preservation is through emulation — software that approximates the hardware of other systems, allowing older videogames to run on current consoles and personal computers. Emulators are usually created by game fans with a knack for programming, making for some of the most reliable translations of classic titles available.

The problem with emulation, though, is that it is almost always connected to videogame piracy. Just as the Internet helps passionate videogame fans to net-

work on projects that revive old titles, it also allows for easy file sharing without any legal restraints. As soon as an emulator is developed for PC and/or Mac, it's used by the majority to play games without having to pay for them. The connection between emulation and piracy is one of the worst strikes against it, but, when consoles stop offering full backwards compatibility and audiences already own copies of PS2 or SNES games without a proper way to play them, the legality of ownership becomes muddied. This problem becomes even more confusing when a game is 25 years old and the rights holders have long since ceased to exist as a company.

Emulation is essential because it simply isn't practical for game fans and critics to try to keep every console (and old computer operating systems or CRT monitors) on hand in order to be able to play games from the past. Without legal means to streamline this process, piracy becomes the only feasible option.

What, then, should the honest person do?

Corporate Attempts at Legal Emulation

Legal emulation has been attempted by many companies to varying degrees of success. As a business enterprise, restoring old games to work on modern systems and release them at fair prices (low enough for buyers to warrant purchasing something old, but high enough to justify the cost of paying the salaries of those carrying out the emulation work) can be a tricky proposition.

Sony, Microsoft and Nintendo have mostly slated rereleases to their respective digital stores, offering console owners access to classic games at (mostly) acceptable price points. Collections of remastered classics from past generations (most notably through frequent releases of hit PS2-era franchises like *Metal Gear Solid*, *God of War* or *Silent Hill*) seem to offer a decent value proposition to consumers — almost every title in a classic series in high-definition, sometimes with interesting extras — but come with their own set of worrying problems. Because they're made to run on the Wii, Xbox 360 and PlayStation 3, there's no guarantee that these classic games will still work on future consoles, making them little more than a stopgap measure in videogame preservation.

Efforts like Good Old Games (rebranded as GOG.com) — a digital store similar to Valve's Steam that concentrates almost entirely on selling properly emulated older titles — are a better bet. GOG, taking advantage of developer/owner CD Projekt's history as a Polish software and videogame distributor/translator, has focused its business on securing legal rights to old titles and releasing them for modern audiences. Where GOG stands out from other digital distributors who sell classic games, though, is in its outstanding work in patching old titles so that they run without issue on the latest versions of Windows. Despite

its success in preserving games (and it is the best option for those wanting to discover or rediscover classics currently available), GOG is still a work in progress. The store's catalogue is large, but needs to add further titles (and, perhaps, reduce prices in some cases) in order to truly establish itself as the kind of preservation solution that the medium needs. It's also limited entirely to PC titles, cutting off an enormous number of important games.

A subscription service based on the GOG model (perhaps a largely expanded version of the interesting, but ultimately flawed Game Room from Microsoft) would represent the ideal method for archiving and sharing older games with modern enthusiasts. A standardized library of computer, console and arcade games, ported to a streamlined multi-platform service — available for a regular fee — would be a great answer for anyone interested in looking into the history of videogames.

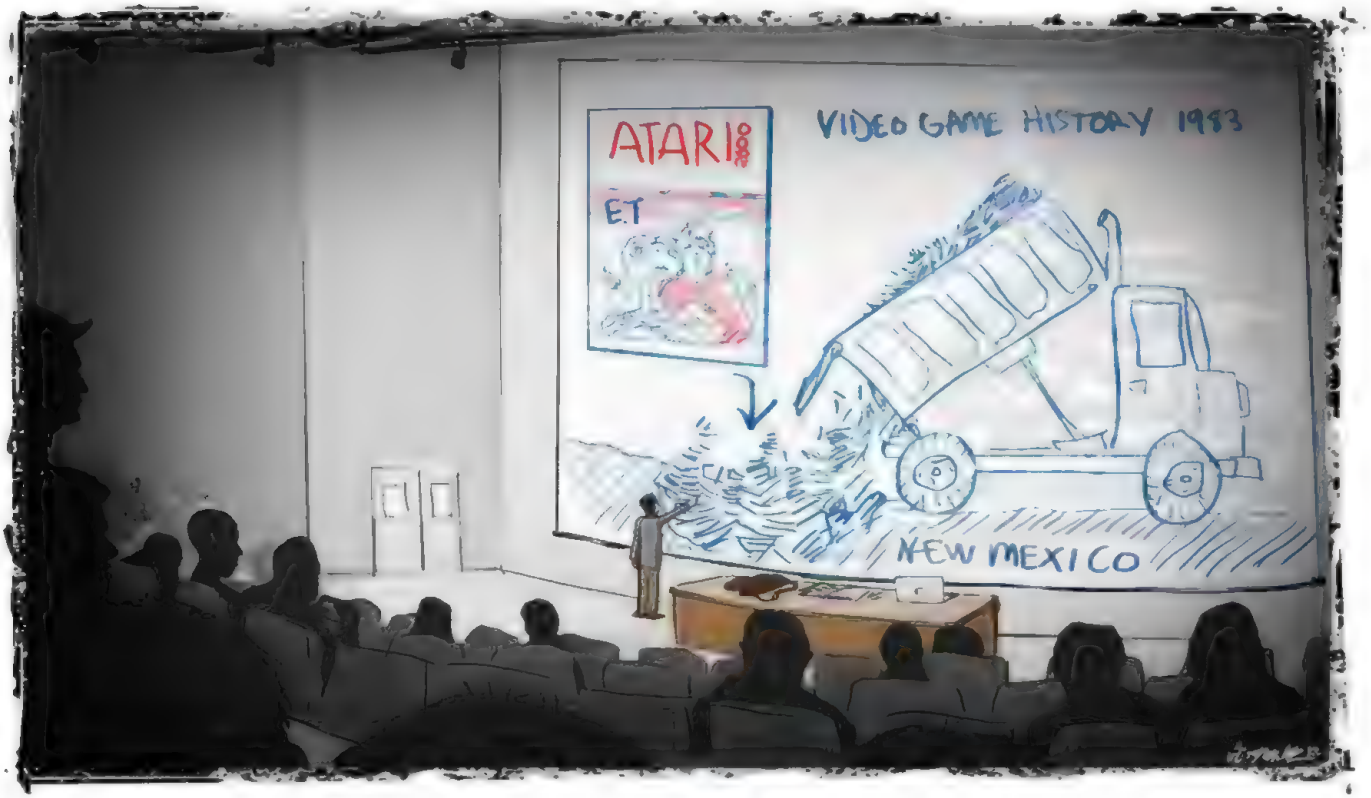
The Importance of the Past

Videogames aren't going anywhere. Playing, discussing and making them is likely to become one of the most significant areas of expression for our generation and those to come. Games now have a permanent place in pop culture, and at that level it doesn't matter whether they are art or just mindless entertainment. Stephanie Meyer and *Paul Blart: Mall Cop* say as much about the cultures that produced them as Michael Chabon and *The Departed*, after all. Regardless of what anyone feels about the artistic value of games, their influence on contemporary society is enormous and has to be chronicled as seriously as any other work of expression created by us.

This is why preserving videogames is important.

When the last Atari 2600 has died *Pitfall!* may live on, while a title of equal importance (and lesser quality) like the historically significant *E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial* may never be playable again. Without being able to reference as many past titles as possible we lose our ability to look back on a rapidly expanding medium. This cuts everyone off from properly discussing and learning from where games have triumphed and failed over the years. If we want better games — if we want to fully explore interactive art and entertainment — then it's essential to work toward the best ways of making old titles easy to access in the form they were meant to be played.

Videogames are a medium that is always looking ahead to what comes next, but if solutions aren't found for preserving significant work from the past, the developers from that same future won't be making games that are nearly as engrossing, enjoyable or interesting as they should be. C&G



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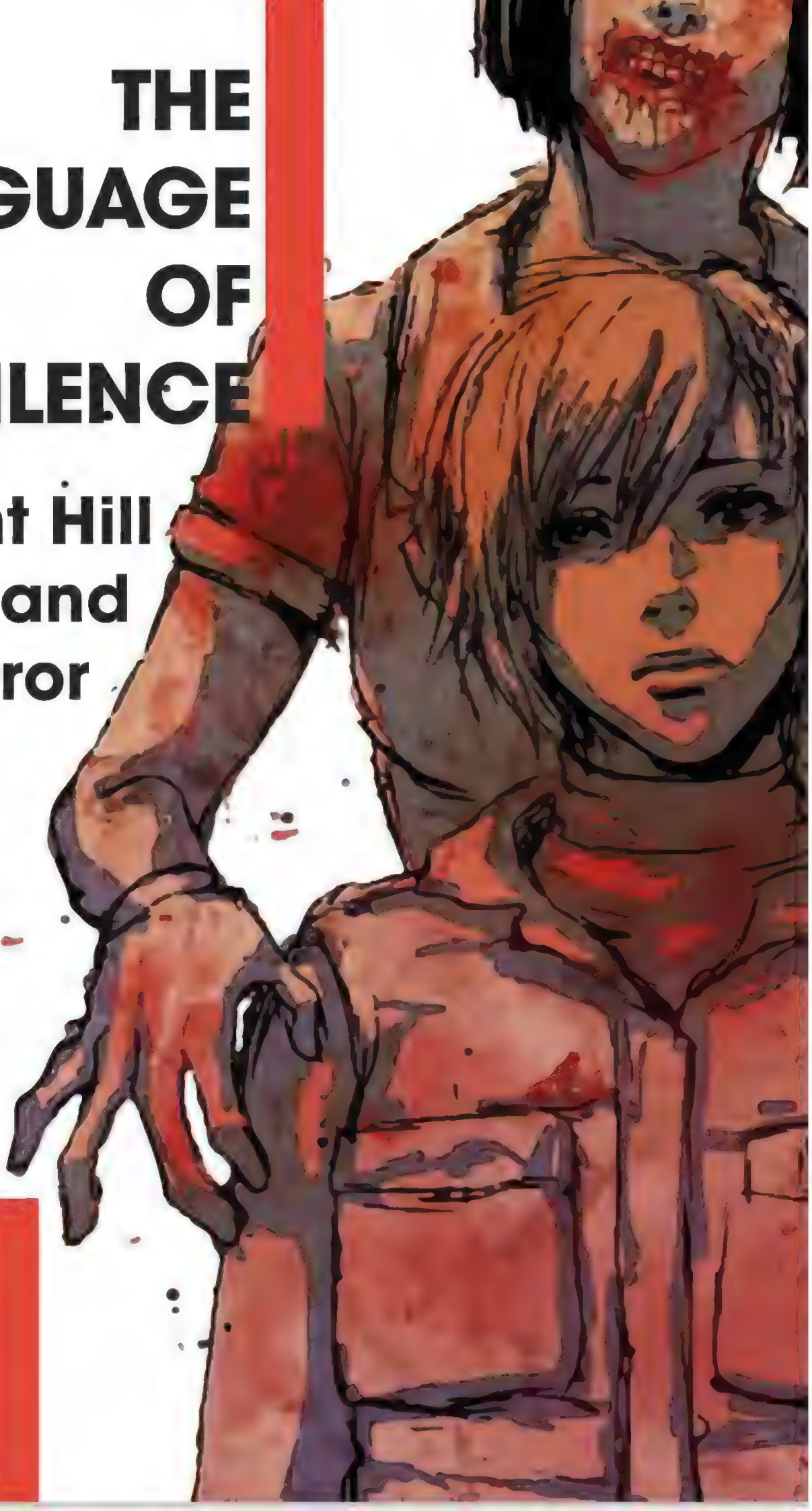
THE LANGUAGE OF SILENCE

Silent Hill and Horror



Words by
Brittany Vincent

Total darkness shrouds you. Armed with only a flashlight, a trembling beam of light guides you as the world you once knew crumbles away into something more sinister. The ambient silence from your dying radio roars to a deafening buzz, and suddenly you're no longer yourself. Fear has overtaken you, transformed you into some sort of inhuman being, one that has no qualms about burying an axe into the skull of wretched creatures that roam the landscape to ensure your survival. Nothing else matters now other than escaping the personal Hell rising up around you. You reach for a rusted pipe, the only viable weapon in your vicinity, and trudge forward into the abyss. This is your life now. This is *Silent Hill*.

But it's not just a mere fictional town. It's hallowed ground for horror enthusiasts. The popular franchise completely revolutionized the way psychological terror incorporates itself into the more primitive jump scares and cheap pop-up tactics from worlds ago. Where most of the chills and thrills we found ourselves cowering from under cover of a heavy blanket in our bedrooms came from the sudden jolt of a hellhound busting through a window, shattering glass and our fleeting sense of safety, the cinematic horror of *Silent Hill* relied on something more sinister: the human psyche and the myriad of demons within.

Its unique brand of psychological horror used in lieu of visceral horror completely altered the limits of what would eventually become acceptable in gaming, paving the way for aware of equally disturbing exercises in survival horror that valued an unsettling atmosphere over B-movie *schlock*. *Silent Hill* was a pioneer even when game critics judged it solely as a "slicker *Resident Evil*" clone, and even though it's never been a perfect monster, it has certainly been an indomitable one. We're looking at the birth of *Silent Hill* and its influence on the horror genre – grab your nearest radio and a handgun. It's gonna be a bumpy ride.

Team Silent

In the heyday of the original PlayStation, *Resident Evil* was king of the fledgling survival horror genre, or at least as far as 3D environments were concerned. And while the prodigious Capcom classic was worth its weight in gold, in terms of its shock factor and status as "go-to zombie classic," it was very much a product of very American styled horror, with big guns, tough guy heroes, and quite possibly one of the most iconic villains in history. *Resident Evil* was a gory, explosive success. But it lacked a certain something – aspects that no one had truly begun to explore just yet.

Enter Team Silent, the development team behind the franchise's starting point. After ownership of Konami had changed hands in 1996, the company looked to push a project that might find its niche amongst American consumers. Team Silent was formed from members of the Konami Computer Entertainment Tokyo studio, and attempts were made at putting a "Hollywood" slant on their future project so as to attract American audiences for their next big hit.

Team Silent went through a series of failed projects and ideas before deciding they would buck the self-imposed limitations set by the higher-ups at Konami, and finally settled on a cinematic project that would instead prey on players' perceptions and emotions. From a muddled group of developers who felt very much like the black sheep of their organization rose the game that would eventually be revealed at 1998's E3 as *Silent Hill*. Public interest and crowd response to the 3D rendering and models for the cast, as well as the unsettling cinematics only served as a booster for Team Silent, and with such a surprisingly favourable reaction Konami was prompted to treat this previously low-profile affair with much more care, allotting a considerably larger amount of resources to be used for the project they felt may actually become a success.

By the time *Silent Hill* released in 1999, it was already initiating a chain of events that would lead to a veritable renaissance in the game industry when it came to scaring the wits out of its patrons.

With a mishmash of cultural references such as David Lynch's erratic filmmaking and composer Angelo Badalamenti's musical motifs, the project quickly evolved into a melting pot of media oddities already enjoyed by the staff, with early versions referencing everything from Michael Crichton's *The Lost World* to Troma Studios producers. While there were changes and cuts made by American staff to alter these references, the influences are easily seen in the narrative that unfolds and especially within the multiple puzzles around the world of *Silent Hill*. And despite its refusal to conform to mainstream ideas in horror, it would begin making waves in the realm, whether it knew it or not. By the time *Silent Hill* released in 1999, it was already initiating a chain of events that would lead to a veritable renaissance in the game industry when it came to scaring the wits out of its patrons.

Reception and Legacy

After battling with censors and a development crew who didn't always fully believe in their product, *Silent Hill* made its debut, to mostly positive reactions, but despite the struggle to create an inherently different experience, most compared it to *Resident Evil*, which wasn't an unforeseen comparison, but parroted by most American reviewers who praised it for attempting something new and relatively unseen in the market.

But the haze of fog veiling the creepy town, the usage of grinding industrial as a backdrop for the madness unfolding on screen, and the cold, steely atmosphere invited naysayers in again for another look. The absence of in-your-face shockers or classic monsters seemed to both puzzle and captivate players, as well as the strange third-person controls that didn't always work the way you needed them to, but added a sense of urgency to an already unsettling atmosphere that didn't openly announce its intentions. Though the voice actors were criticized for lackluster performances, despite the outside references to other games, critics generally regarded *Silent Hill* as a triumph of psychological horror later on down the road. But the ball didn't really get to rolling until subsequent releases found the niche Team Silent originally meant to carve. The onslaught of disturbing mannequin-like creatures, psychotic nurses, and tales of death and rebirth would press on, through a whopping eight more instalments, evolving and transforming with each subsequent entry.

Continuation

Silent Hill 2 was undeniably the release that propelled the franchise into the forefront as a pioneer of the genre, with another original soundtrack by Akira Yamaoka, a new mind-bending narrative, and certain memorable scenes that would remain in players' minds for years to come. Interestingly enough, it received lesser critical scores than its predecessor, despite improving on it in many notable ways and introducing series mainstay and certifiable mascot; Pyramid Head.

Silent Hill 3's unique brand of (understandable) teenage angst, father-daughter love, and rebirth resonated with players as a nod to the beloved characters from *Silent Hill* the original. Heather was a bratty yet capable heroine that acted as the strong female protagonist the previous games had been missing and added an element of sarcastic realism that hadn't truly been explored before, allowing characters a certain more intimate level of fear and trepidation, and the reappearance of Pyramid Head, to the fans' delight.

Silent Hill 4: The Room was a decidedly different departure, introducing enemies who couldn't be downed by conventional means, one of the most helplessly depressing trailer songs of all times, and psychotic visuals that pushed the limits of all that came before it.

After the "main" four games in the series it began to turn in a new direction, with alterations to core gameplay, tone, and even the manner in which players would interact with the environment. The "new-school" *Silent Hill* adventures include *Silent Hill: Downpour*, *Silent Hill: Homecoming*, *Silent Hill: Shattered Memories*, and more – though none have managed to live up to fan expectations in the manner the earlier releases did.

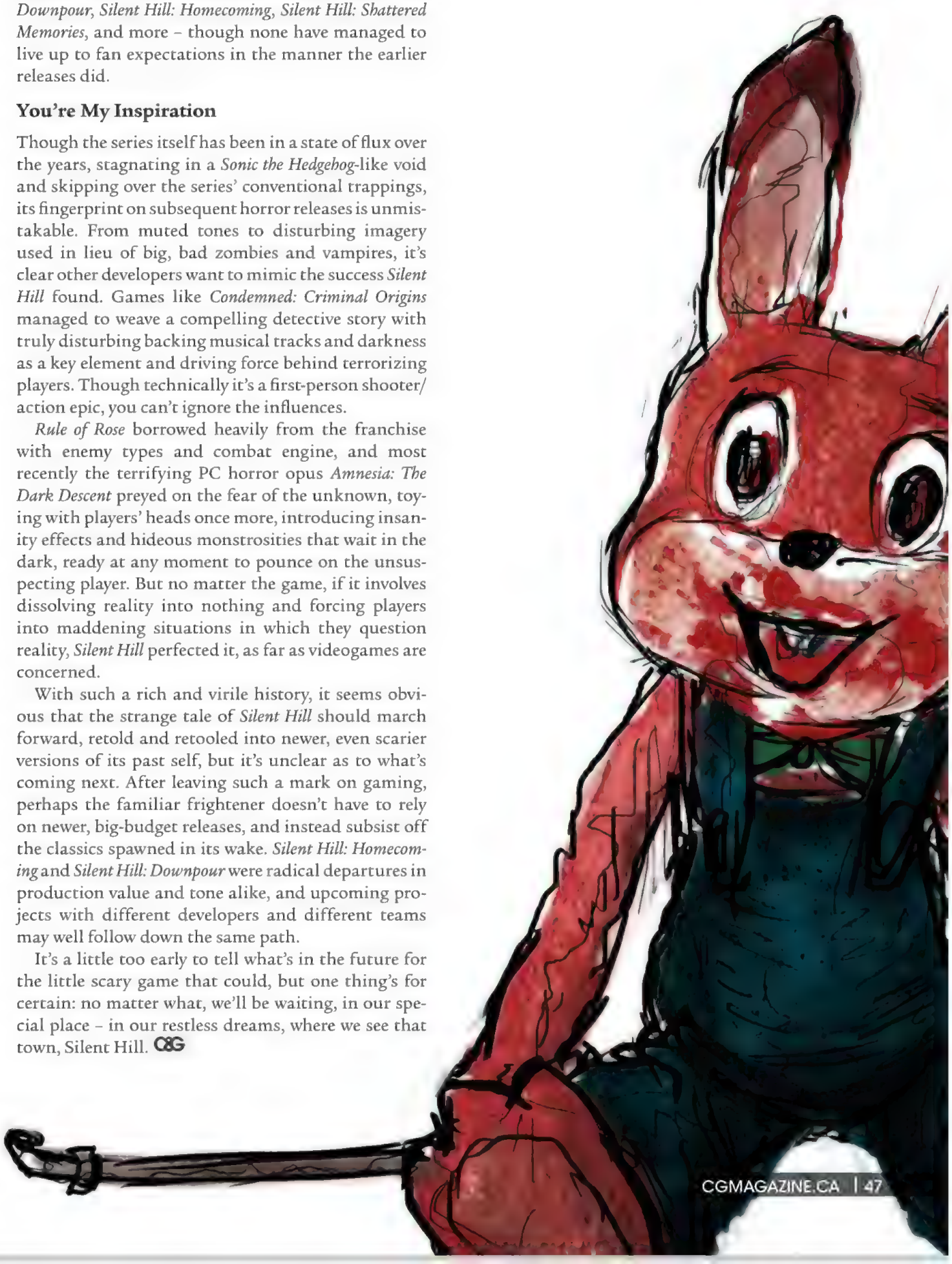
You're My Inspiration

Though the series itself has been in a state of flux over the years, stagnating in a *Sonic the Hedgehog*-like void and skipping over the series' conventional trappings, its fingerprint on subsequent horror releases is unmistakable. From muted tones to disturbing imagery used in lieu of big, bad zombies and vampires, it's clear other developers want to mimic the success *Silent Hill* found. Games like *Condemned: Criminal Origins* managed to weave a compelling detective story with truly disturbing backing musical tracks and darkness as a key element and driving force behind terrorizing players. Though technically it's a first-person shooter/action epic, you can't ignore the influences.

Rule of Rose borrowed heavily from the franchise with enemy types and combat engine, and most recently the terrifying PC horror opus *Amnesia: The Dark Descent* preyed on the fear of the unknown, toying with players' heads once more, introducing insanity effects and hideous monstrosities that wait in the dark, ready at any moment to pounce on the unsuspecting player. But no matter the game, if it involves dissolving reality into nothing and forcing players into maddening situations in which they question reality, *Silent Hill* perfected it, as far as videogames are concerned.

With such a rich and virile history, it seems obvious that the strange tale of *Silent Hill* should march forward, retold and retooled into newer, even scarier versions of its past self, but it's unclear as to what's coming next. After leaving such a mark on gaming, perhaps the familiar frightener doesn't have to rely on newer, big-budget releases, and instead subsist off the classics spawned in its wake. *Silent Hill: Homecoming* and *Silent Hill: Downpour* were radical departures in production value and tone alike, and upcoming projects with different developers and different teams may well follow down the same path.

It's a little too early to tell what's in the future for the little scary game that could, but one thing's for certain: no matter what, we'll be waiting, in our special place – in our restless dreams, where we see that town, Silent Hill. CG



WORDS BY
WAYNE SANTOS

THE 80s

A PEEK INTO SIMPLER TIMES

It's a little mind-boggling to look back and think that the hobby so many of us love today, gaming, had its roots in the not so humble era of disco. When people were wearing bell bottom pants and sporting butterfly collars that threatened to decapitate the wearer, primitive first generation hardware like the Magnavox Odyssey and the Coleco Telstar were making the first inroads to gaming as we know it today.

That era really began in 1977, with the second generation of consoles, and it was the dawn of a new age of innocence. A little company known as Apple Computer Inc. was starting up. The kids were lining up around the block—multiple times—to check out a new movie called *Star Wars*, and in living rooms around the first world, tech enthusiast dads were introducing their children to the wood grained wonder that was the Atari 2600. It had multiple controllers, it used cartridges, and little did anyone realize at the time, it was the genesis of the first great hatred amongst nerds as they would go on to take up arms in loyalty to competing forms of hardware. With the introduction of the Atari 2600, the world's first "mainstream" console as we understand the term today, we also got a peak into the future, with the first console war.

The Cartridge Game

The Atari 2600 wasn't the first system to enable the use of a delivery system for differing content; that honour goes to the Fairchild Channel F. But it was the first to get big enough to go mainstream, crossing the boundary beyond a curiosity for the tech inclined, and entering enough living rooms that "Playing Atari" would set the precedent for "Playing Nintendo/SEGA/PlayStation/Xbox" that continues to this day. The Atari 2600, with its mandatory 70s inspired wood grain panelling—and yes, it *did* need that to be considered for cutting edge design in 1977—brought an unprecedented level of convenience to the game console. Where previous hardware came with a handful of games hard wired into the gear itself, the 2600 was expandable. Not only could players replace the one button joystick with paddle controls and even a keypad, there were switches for controlling the level of difficulty and changing the modes of the game if any were available. And of course, there were the cartridges; entirely new games, with more coming out every few weeks. The Atari 2600 created the gaming—and gamers—as we understand it today.

It's quaint to think on it now, but the Atari 2600 also brought gamers their first taste of licensed properties, although it came from the most unlikely of places to modern audiences; the video arcade. This was an era when high powered, consumer accessible computing cost only one or two quarters at the arcade. The Atari 2600 was the first to bring some of these hits to the home with Atari itself digging into its own library to present *Asteroids* to gamers at home, and eventually other heavy hitters like *Space Invaders* and *Defender*. A year later another contender hit, Magnavox's Odyssey², but comparable tech with a smaller library sidelined this competitor early on.

It was a golden age of gaming for the young and young at heart at the time. It was a toy that would always have something new to offer, a completely unheard of feature at the time. And, from an industry perspective, it also created the first—and still most successful—third-party developer and publisher of the time. Sure, there were other companies like Imagic, Apollo and Starpath that have come and gone, but Activision had very humble beginnings with the Atari 2600 and continues to this day as a dominant force in the industry. Ex-Atari refugees, tired of low pay and no credit for their best-selling games, started a new company, and from there Activision went to create some of the most memorable titles in the fledgling industry, including *Pitfall!*, a franchise that survives to this day.

The Atari 2600 was the opening shot heard round the world for gaming. Three years later, the first serious counterattack was launched.

Toy Companies Get Angry

In retrospect, it's not all that surprising that it wasn't another Silicon Valley technology company that eventually provided the Atari 2600 with its first real rival. The videogame was seen—and rightly so—as an enemy to the long-standing supremacy of toy companies for the children's market. And with this realization came the retaliation. Mattel, makers of iconic toy lines such as Barbie for girls and He-Man for boys, put their electronics division to work and in 1980, three years after the Atari 2600 dominated the market, came the Intellivision.

This is pretty much the first official console war right here. All the tactics and strategies that we take for granted—as well as a few that are now pretty much legally impossible—were used in this first great battle between console manufacturers. The Intellivison, of course, had one clear advantage over the 2600; it was using technology three years younger, and as we all know, in the world of PC and console gaming, a three year difference in technology can mean a lot.

This is where kids had to get themselves up to speed with their teenage and adult peers if they wanted to make informed choices about what they wanted for Christmas. The Intellivision clearly had the technology advantage. The Atari 2600 had a meagre 4K of ROM built in for memory and cartridge use, while the Intellivsion nearly doubled that with 7K. The Intellivision also had a miniature keypad built into its default controllers, allowing for many button configurations that helped make possible early RPGs like *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons*. It was, in every way a beast of a machine clearly made with the Reagan era in mind; many buttons to push so things would blow up.

What it didn't have was the prominent exclusives.

That three year gap—and Atari's own arcade heritage—was the other side of the Intellivision coin. Of course Intellivision had exclusives. *Space Battle* showed what the system could do, and third-party developers like Imagic made games on the system that simply weren't technically feasible on the 2600, like *Dracula* which had players stalking victims in the night and draining them of their blood after luring them out of their homes. They were good games that showed originality and technical proficiency, but they weren't the games in the arcade that the youth of the time were playing and talking about.

Atari on the other hand, owned or had the licenses to some of the biggest titles in the arcades of the day. *Missile Command*, *Asteroids*, *Pac-Man* and many others were only available on the 2600 because they made the game, or simply got the license years earlier. In that sense, there are similarities to the PS3 versus Xbox 360 console war of the current generation. The PS3, like Intellivision may have the superior specifications, but the Xbox 360 has *Halo* and *Gears of War*.

Meanwhile the third-party developers, having no allegiance to either manufacturer did then what they're doing now; make multi-platform games. It should surprise no one that Activision, wanting to make more money, took their biggest 2600 hit, *Pitfall!* and made an Intellivision version. In other words, even as far back as 1982, they were pulling a "*Call of Duty*" and making sure everyone could play the biggest hit of the market. Imagic made versions of *Demon Attack*, *Dragon Fire* and *Atlantis* for both consoles as well.

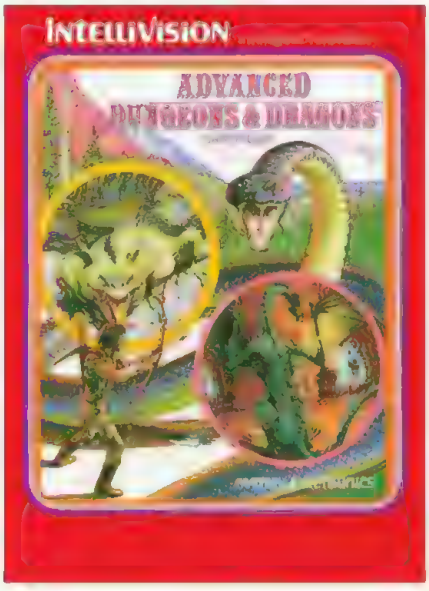
As to be expected in a war, battle lines were drawn. Atari and Intellivision faced each other down in advertising, with Atari hurling the iconic slogan "Have you played Atari today?" Intellivision took a more effete approach with George Plimpton acting as an intelligent spokesman, candidly showing off the technical superiority of the Intellivision system. The gamers, as always, were caught in the middle and left to form the first fanboy cliques, get into the first arguments, and form the first loyalties to a piece of hardware. Fortunately, there was no Internet in the 80s, so it was impossible for the anonymous, rage fuelled, online hate-mongering of today to ensue.

This was the heyday of the first great console war. I still remember personally being involved in it as a young gamer, and am profoundly thankful for the lack of the Internet at the time. The early publications like *Electronic Gaming Magazine* and *Electronic Fun* both covered the available platforms, and gamers were given a forum of sorts, writing mail to the editors and communicating in the only way practical at the time; face to face. Recess arguments for kids, dorm debates for college students, and the occasional heated discussion between elder nerds at the office. These were the ways that gamers of the 80s picked a side and clashed. It was a simpler time for gamers, a new and exciting time on the cusp of a young medium coming into its own.

And it didn't last. It all came crashing down very quickly just a few short years later.

The Mexican Stand-Off That Imploded

As any seasoned veteran of a capitalist economy will tell you, once a concept is proven to sell, the "masses" of other corporations try to cash in. What was once classic showdown between two console giants turned into a wrestling free-for-all with other contenders running in at timed intervals to get a piece of the action. The other big toy manufacturer of the day, Coleco, threw down an impressive gauntlet with ColecoVision, a system that sported a whopping 32K of ROM on the cartridges, and a boatload of licenses from big arcade developers like

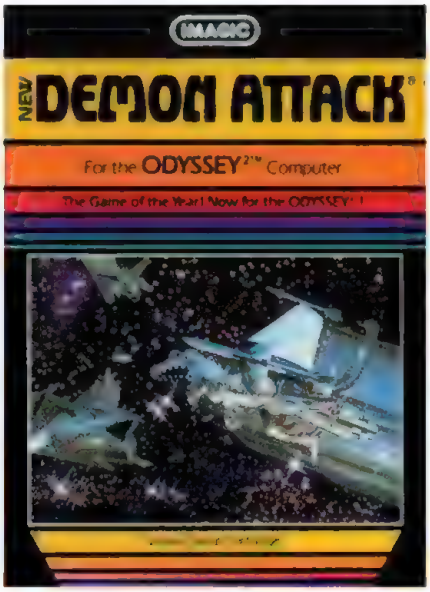


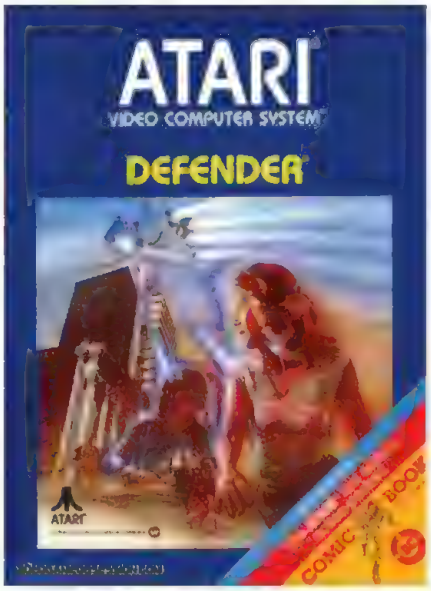
SEGA with *Zaxxon*, Universal with *Cosmic Avenger* and, of course, Nintendo with *Donkey Kong*. The real kicker here, however, is that Coleco took things one step further than anyone has ever dared since then. They created something called "Expansion Module One" a new piece of hardware that slotted directly into a port at the front of the console. The new expansion was an Atari 2600 emulator. Obviously, this was a pretty big deal. Why continue to settle for a technically inferior console with its admittedly huge library of games when you could buy a new model and *still* be able to play those old games? Imagine the outrage today if Microsoft had announced that the Xbox 360 would also have PS2 compatibility, this sort of thing simply would not be legally possible in today's industry, and yet in the summer of 1982, that's exactly what happened, with Coleco adding insult to injury be releasing a stand-alone version of this same emulator, called Gemini.

Naturally Atari took them to court, but actually lost the case when it was deemed that Coleco had every right to create this tech since Atari had used publicly available, off-the-shelf parts. The lack of any proprietary hardware made the courts decide Atari had no case and so a three-way war was on. That three-way only lasted for another year, as another upstart, again from a toy company, this time Milton Bradley, presented the Vectrex to the market. Unlike the other units, this hardware was completely self-contained since it sported its own vector monitor. It wasn't colour, but it was a self-contained unit that appealed to the geeky mindset and looked more like other vector arcade classics like *Tempest* and *Battlezone* than raster titles that ran on conventional televisions. In short order, it started to carve out a small, unique niche for itself.

Unfortunately for Milton Bradley, the Vectrex came far too late to the party. The gold rush for gaming had ended, and it was due to a combination of factors that would plague the industry for years to come. The first was an abundance of "shovelware," something Atari was particularly guilty of, with its infamous release of *E.T. The Extra-Terrestrial*, a game so bad that not only did people not buy it, the remaining inventory got dumped in a hole in the desert because no one wanted it. The second was the changing, fickle nature of the audience. Like with *Tony Hawk* and the music games like *Rock Band* and *Guitar Hero*, the audience grew tired of the gaming, and 1983 saw the crash of the entire market. Some companies, like Coleco, didn't survive this culling and died off entirely, while others like Mattel and Milton Bradley, survived by abandoning the industry entirely and returning to toys. Only Atari emerged as the surviving "pure" gaming company, but they would never again reach that level of dominance in the market. For the next several years and generations, gaming would belong to Japan, starting with Nintendo, then SEGA and finally Sony, before ceding the crown back to America with Microsoft.

That was the close of the first great console war. From humble beginnings with the Atari 2600, the industry quickly grew into a simpler semblance of what we see today. Mistakes were made, court cases were won and lost, and ultimately arrogance and carelessness brought about a crash that nearly killed the entire industry. But obviously there was something to gaming that was more than a flash-in-the-pan fashion. It survived, it grew, and is now pulling more money than Hollywood films in some cases. And yes, the console wars of today are more heated than ever thanks to the Internet, anonymity and the greater than ever distribution of both game consoles and games to more places around the world. Console wars are here to stay, and probably going to get more intense with every new generation. CGM





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REVIEWS

The Secret World

Spec Ops: The Line

Darksiders II

Deadlight

New Super Mario Bros. 2

Sleeping Dogs

Kingdom Hearts 3D: Dream Drop Distance

Persona 4 Arena

Sound Shapes

Dyad

Daredevil by Mark Waid Volume 1

Batman: No Man's Land Volume 3

FF Volume 2

The Manhattan Projects #5

REVIEW GUIDE:

90 - 100
Games with little to no flaws that provide an exceptional entertainment experience. New high watermarks of quality or design are established with such titles, and these games are must-haves for fans of the genre as well as good places for newcomers to start.

80 - 89
Games that manage to provide a good, entertaining experience with only small flaws that are overlooked by the polish or innovation of the title. Both fans and newcomers to the genre will likely find something to appreciate here.

70 - 79
Games that manage to keep mechanical, technical and design flaws to a minimum while providing a solid experience. Generally enough to satisfy but not impress fans or gamers outside the genre.

60 - 69
Games that manage to get it mostly right functionally, without ever really moving beyond that. Flaws present can still have an impact on the experience. Fans of the genre and more tolerant gamers can enjoy these titles.

50-59
Games that meet the minimum requirements of functionality, but just barely. Mechanical, technical and design problems are still present, though not to the point of complete unplayability. Only desperate fans would see value in these titles.

Below 50
Games that fail to meet even the most basic requirements of entertainment and competence with serious mechanical and/or design flaws. Avoid at all costs.

The Secret World

REVIEW BY: Wayne Santos

SYSTEM: PC **DEVELOPER:** Funcom **PUBLISHER:** Electronic Arts **ESRB:** M

85/100

Funcom and Ragnar Tornquist have a lot riding on *The Secret World*. It's a subscription based MMO coming out at a time when that business model is failing for anything that's not *World of Warcraft*. It's a game coming on the heels of *Age of Conan* which previewed with a lot of promise but failed to live up to it in the end game. And finally, it's the first MMO that Ragnar Tornquist has led, which is a big departure for a man normally associated with some of the most treasured adventure games in the genre, *The Longest Journey* series. So when it came time to sit down and evaluate *TSW* what was there was not the abject failure some had speculated, but instead a complex, moody and surprisingly original MMO with some significant issues.

The Lesser Of Three Evils

The Secret World starts things off with an oblique cut scene. After creating your character with a decent—but not wildly robust—creation system and picking a faction, you're treated to your character, in bed, swallowing a magic bee. I'm not making that up. The magic bee grants you mystical powers, and after a few days of trashing your apartment and gaining some minor mastery over your newfound abilities, your faction recruiter shows up, and you're eventually whisked away to learn more about your chosen organization, and the fact that 'Dark Days Are Coming,' the marketing catchphrase used throughout *TSW's* promotion, which also happens to be the premise of the game.

The basic plot—and surprisingly, *TSW* does have one that matters to the game—is that pretty much every myth, conspiracy theory or urban legend you've ever heard of is not only true, but alive and well in the modern day and ramping up to steam roll the world as we know it. Three factions, the old world Templars, the power obsessed Illuminati, and the chaos theorists known as the Dragon, have a shaky alliance going to fight this rise in the paranormal. None of them are particularly noble or good, but all of them have an interest in not ceding their authority of the world to slumbering, near-omnipotent, Lovecraftian elder gods.

One of the most surprising things about the story in *The Secret World* is how rich it is. It's a no-brainer that when you're drawing from the legend and myth of every major culture in the world you'll have a lot of lore, but beyond that, the characterization of the NPCs you meet is almost shocking. Chalk it up to Ragnar Tornquist and the obsession for character he showed in *The Longest Journey* and *Dreamfall*, but every humble mission giver you encounter is by turns quirky, funny, tragic, haunted, crazy, frightened... the vast spectrum of emotions you'd expect from people staring apocalypse in the face. They didn't need to be, but a considerable effort was expended in making these quite possibly the most well written characters in MMOs today.

Moving over to the visual side of things, this is where the game starts to show some blemishes. By modern PC standards this is definitely not the prettiest looking game from a technical perspective. The game has been in development for six years, using the same engine as its sibling *Age of Conan* and in a lot of ways this shows. Any PC built in the last five years should be able to run the game smoothly at mid-range settings. Animation outside of the mo-capped cut scenes are a bit stiff, and the number of polygons on show seems to be about equivalent to what you'd expect from a console release. The art direction, on the other hand, shows a lot of imagination and effort; rural homes in Maine look like the real thing, and streets of London look as broken down and unfriendly as they are in real life. Even the 'PC bangs' of Seoul have the details and worn in look that shows the art team did some serious homework in making this first, contemporary-based MMO feel familiar and authentic.

The sound is pretty much a win. Because of the global nature of the game, players are treated to a variety of accents, and the acting is all extremely well done. Once again, with the possible exception of *The Old Republic*—since BioWare has been at this for a while—you probably won't find another MMO with so many solid performances behind the characters. The music is also extremely rich, with a variety of orchestrations that provide deep, nuanced melodies. The music isn't always there either, fading in and out of the soundscape depending on the situation, and sometimes leaving the player to work through the world on their own. Actual sound effects don't fare quite so well. The game uses a combination of modern arms, ancient arms and magic, with none of these weapons providing the kind of "Oomph" one would expect. It's not an FPS and so doesn't have the same imperative to provide such dynamic sound. Instead what we get is something functional that occasionally pairs up in odd ways with the interface sound effects to acknowledge command inputs. There's nothing here that's fundamentally broken, it's just a poor showing compared to the stellar voice work and music.

Months Of Paranoia

This is an MMO. So, if you're not playing it every day, for hours at a time, trying to get to the "end" as quickly as possible for review purposes/bragging rights, you'll definitely have your days filled with everything from Sasquatch encounters to shady corporate shenanigans to the tune of $15.00 CAD per month. But first, let's talk about what *The Secret World* does right.

It's obvious from a mechanical perspective that *TSW* has been built by people that have played *a lot* of MMOs and are tired of many of the conventions that MMOs take for granted. That's not to say it completely throws out the rulebook, it doesn't; in many ways, it's still quite conventional. But there are some essential tweaks made to formula that bring much more convenience and sociability to the table than other competitors.

First and foremost, in a move that I hope becomes standard for all future MMOs, the idea of a "home server" is irrelevant. Players still pick a server—or "dimensions" in *TSW* parlance—that have specific orientations, like the role playing or French speaking server, but that doesn't mean you can *only* play with others on the same server. Regardless of whether your friends joined the game earlier or later than you and start out in another server, all players can freely join up and "migrate" over to server of another friend in order to play together. In some cases, this feature has even been used to allow others to bypass bugged instances of a quest in their own server that are working correctly for others. This is a fantastic idea that does away entirely with dividing players based on region on server availability and it needs to be implemented in more games going forward.

Another interesting addition of the game is the way it handles classes and levels. There aren't any to speak of. Like *Star Wars Galaxies* or *DC Universe Online*, players are

free to select any skills they like and combine them with other skills for characters that suit their gameplay. So you can have tank/healer combos, or even DPS/healer hybrids if you like playing a support role but still want to be a part of the action. The player's ability to take on enemies of increasing difficulty is now determined by the level of the gear they have access to. So a character with only a limited number of skills who focused in on a Quality Level of ten for weapons and accessories—the current ceiling—might still be able to stand toe to toe, with a player with a lot of abilities but a Quality Level of only five for gear.

The emphasis on accessories—which by the way are invisible and only appear in your character slots on your character screen—also means that the game, like *DC Universe Online*, doesn't suffer from cookie cutter appearances. There is no "best armour" that forces all players at high levels to look like an endless line of stormtroopers. Clothing in this game is strictly cosmetic, so anyone can maintain their favourite look without sacrificing stats to do it. Only weapons change in visible appearance as characters progress.

Finally, there are the quests, which are the shining jewel in *The Secret World's* crown. Yes, there will still be the usual "kill 10 rats"—or in this case, zombies—quota filling tasks, but Funcom really has thrown in a little something for everyone. There are occasional stealth missions that task players with sneaking through areas without being seen, and there are investigation missions, which are the high point of the game. Investigation missions ask players to take advantage of the built-in browser in order to do everything from decipher Morse code, to studying up on ancient Egyptian deities to get your gods right. They make players do some brain work instead of finger work with occasionally fiendish puzzles reminiscent of the obstacles thrown at players in the promotional ARG leading up *TSW's* release. Never before has such an integrated, investigative/adventure game style component been worked into an MMO, and so successfully at that.

The most compelling things about the quests are the people themselves and the world this takes place in. This is our world, complete with references to Google and Xbox achievements, not a fantasy realm or the far flung future. As mentioned before the writing and acting is extremely well done, and this, combined with a story that really feels like it's going somewhere, pushes players forward. Not every quest is fully voiced, but all the major ones—particularly the main storyline—are, and it's in these quests that the full texture and richness of the world is felt. Questions are asked, implications are made, genuine curiosity is provoked, and a need to keep playing manifests if only to find out what happens next. Choices are also asked of the player at critical points in the main storyline, but because of the ongoing nature of an MMO, it's not clear yet just how those choices will finally play out. I finished the main story, making consistent choices throughout, and although immediate threats were resolved, there's still a question hanging about whether or not there will be future consequences from the choices I made.

But for all the things *The Secret World* gets right, it does stumble in a few places. The most unfortunate miss is

the steep learning curve for newbies. You can tell this game was built by experienced MMO players, and, being what they are, they've neglected to make the tutorials as beginner friendly as they could be. I've clocked in quite a bit of time with other MMOs so while the terminology and exact nuances were unfamiliar, it only took a little time to get to grips with the system. For an absolute newbie that doesn't even know about chat channels, or what DPS means, there's a massive brick wall of ignorance they are about to ram into at sonic speed, and *TSW* does little to alleviate the experience. Very basic tutorials are inadequate to the task of explaining MMO basics, assuming, once again, years of previous experience.

The combat also feels a bit stale because it hews so closely to the *EQ/WoW* formula of cool downs, damage over time, and all the other conventions we've come to associate with the genre. It tries to spice things up a little by adding a mobility element; major enemy attacks are signified with white lines fully hinting at the area of effect, giving players a second or two to dodge out of the way, but aside from that, it's the usual spamming of hot keys, building up resources for high value attacks and looting. There's also PvP, though in this case, it's not like a PvP server. PvP is limited to "Battlefields" which are essentially various PvP modes like capture the flag and king of the hill locked away in separate instances, and the Warzone, which is a constant, ongoing, PvP event in which players fight for control of a territory with faction-wide benefits as long as they maintain that control. It's not the most polished affair; the ability to pick from so many skills has already unleashed some truly horrifying troll builds to torment other players, but Funcom has wisely kept this separate from the rest of the game so it doesn't impact the players more interested in exploring the world and lore.

And finally, there are the bugs. *TSW* has them, and plenty, but no more so than most other big MMOs. Unfortunately a lot of the bugs are tied into the quest themselves, so players can expect to run into missions they'll be unable to complete without help from a GM, or a friend they can group with and teleport to a working instance of their current quest. It's not ideal, but there are workarounds when this happens.

In the end, obvious, looming question is, "Is *The Secret World* worth $15 a month?" I would say, cautiously, yes. It's a very different game, a difficult game, that does a lot of brave things, and provides players with a unique, original MMO experience. Content is going to be added on a daily basis, and complaints like the lack of variety in clothing and greater development of PvP are supposedly being addressed in future, monthly updates. On the other hand, there's the question of just how long *TSW* is actually going to require a monthly subscription. Its sibling *Age of Conan* already free-to-play, and *The Old Republic* has also announced a similar move. There's really no doubt that, despite its learning curve and bugs, this is an MMO worth playing. It's really just down to you whether you want to wait for a day when it goes free-to-play, or bite the bullet and start subscribing now. Either way, you're entering into a unique, original, compelling world with a largely good crowd of players, and a story worth paying attention to, a rarity in the MMO space. CGM

Spec Ops: The Line

REVIEW BY: Tim Ashdown

SYSTEM: PS3, Xbox 360, PC DEVELOPER: Yager Development PUBLISHER: 2K Games ESRB: M 85/100

Spec Ops is hardly the new kid on the block, gamers were first introduced to this third-person military shooter franchise way back in 1998. Since then there's been some sequels and spin offs but the series has effectively been on hiatus since 2002. At one point the recently shuttered Rockstar Vancouver was even at work on a *Spec Ops* game that was eventually canceled. It may have been a long time coming but the *Spec Ops* series has returned this time with Berlin's Yager Development at the helm. While the series may have been relegated to the "budget" category earlier in its life span, the same is hardly true for the series' latest entry *Spec Ops: The Line*. Set in post-apocalyptic Dubai, UAE, *The Line* is a dark and gritty journey into the city and also into the darkness that lies within the game's protagonist Capt. Martin Walker. Where other shooters like *Call of Duty* or *Battlefield* tend to deal with a larger conflict, *The Line* tells a much more personal story and does it exceptionally well.

A Desert of Darkness

Six months before the beginning of the game Dubai was hit by cataclysmic sandstorms which effectively buried the city leaving behind the ruins of a once wealthy and opulent metropolis. In the wake of the disaster the wealthy and powerful have abandoned the city leaving the rest of the civilian population to fend for themselves. Then the 33rd Infantry Division known as "The Damned 33rd" assists in the evacuation of Dubai on their way home from Afghanistan. It's there that the details get a little fuzzy but what matters is the 33rd never made it out of Dubai. Six months later the US Military received a message from the commander of the 33rd. The message was brief and said "This is Colonel John Konrad, United States Army. Attempted evacuation of Dubai has ended in complete failure. Death toll: too many." The message prompts the US Army to send in Capt. Walker and his fellow Delta operators on a simple mission: Determine if there are any survivors and then radio for Evac. This is where our story begins and what follows is a wonderfully crafted narrative which invokes comparisons to Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now*, and Joesph Conrad's *Hearts of Darkness*.

The comparisons to *Apocalypse Now* are easy seeing as how this is a war game. *The Line* invokes these comparisons by illustrating the lack of glory in war and the struggle within oneself to make sense of the terrible things witnessed on the battlefield. It does this in many ways, Capt. Walker's internal monologue is very similar to Capt. Willard's poetic soliloquies in *Apocalypse Now* and a scene where white phosphorus is used by Walker and his team reminded me of *Apocalypse Now's* famous sampan massacre scene. The heart of the story is about Walker's journey into the city of Dubai and his emotional breakdown during that journey which is where the direct comparisons to Conrad's *Hearts of Darkness* can be made. The game also features an element of player choice but these moments are so subtle that oftentimes players won't even realize that they've made a decision. It's this subtlety that I find refreshing, often choices in games are very obvious, taking the form of direct instructions like "press L trigger to execute" or "press R trigger to save". In *The Line*, players are simply presented with a situation and it's up to them to react how they see fit. It is obvious that the narrative and story in *The Line* are crafted with an exceptional amount of care and contain influences beyond just Conrad and Coppola. *Generation Kill*, *The Hurt Locker*, *Platoon*, the list goes on. I was amazed that despite the numerous influences *The Line's* story is exceptionally

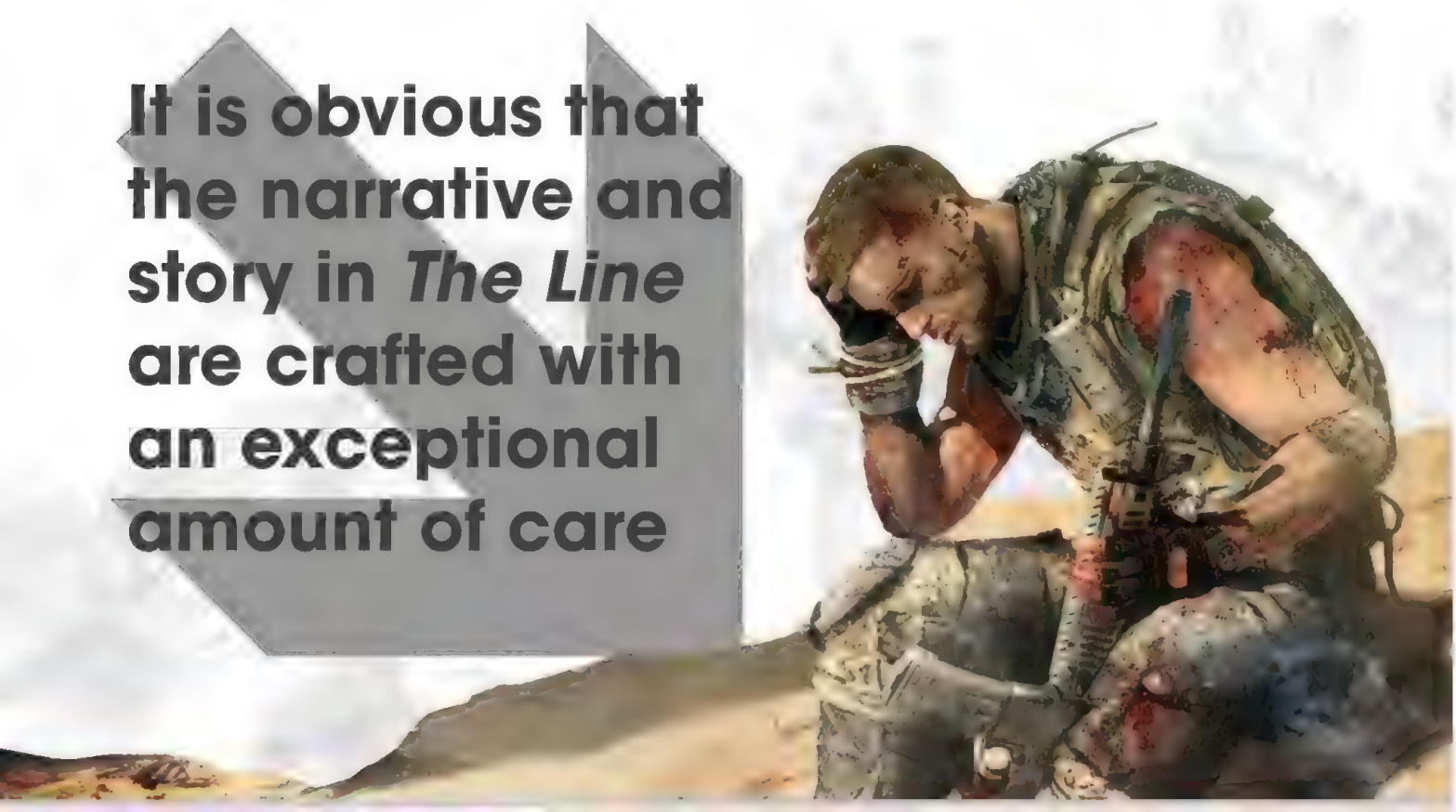
tight, coherent and I enjoyed every minute of it. From the distorted guitar version of Star and Stripes on the title screen to the multiple endings which drive the game's point home. *The Line* has one of the best military stories I've ever seen in a shooter.

The gameplay found in *The Line* is very competent as far as third-person shooters are concerned. While there isn't a lot that deviates from the traditional take cover and pop out gameplay what does deviate from the formula is well done and fun. One of the game's main mechanics comes in the form of sand. Since Dubai is buried under the stuff it makes complete sense that the developers at Yager would incorporate sand into the gameplay. This is done in a few ways. First, if a frag grenade is tossed onto some sand it will kick up a large cloud disorienting nearby enemies. I found this to be extremely effective when fighting waves of enemy combatants when I was all out of flashbangs. It's an organic feature that I found to be effective and fun to use. Sticking with the idea of sand, another element used in The Line comes in the form of "sand traps". Throughout the single player campaign and again on multiplayer maps you can find structural weak points that will unleash a cascade of sand on unsuspecting enemies. All you need to do is shoot the weak points, normally indicated by a small cascade of sand. It only comes up a few times during the campaign but when it does, it's exceptionally satisfying to see your enemies buried alive. Aside from the sand there's also some squad commands that can be issued to your fellow Delta Operators. If you find yourself suppressed by enemy fire the game will often prompt you to issue a squad command to "flash" the enemy. You can also direct your squad mates to focus their fire on a particular enemy giving you a moment to move to better cover or better yet provide a distraction so you can zero your target. The squad commands are easy to use and add a bit of depth to the overall gameplay. While I didn't find the gameplay anything to write home about, the added touches of sand elements and squad commands made what could have been a very generic experience unique enough to keep me interested.

Surprises and Sandstorms

The Line also features a multiplayer component which does a good job of checking off most of the boxes necessary to be considered decent, yet lacks the legs to keep people playing. After trying out most of the different game modes I found myself only returning to the basic free-for-all deathmatch. Most of the fun I had during these free-for-all deathmatches came from using cover and then popping out from behind to surprise the other players. The amount of panic I inspired in my rivals was truly awesome. There is some player progression in the form of experience points, which allow you to unlock new weapons armour and perks. As I mentioned before the "sand trap" mechanic carries over the multiplayer where it is much more useful rather than just being a scripted event. During my play time I would often laugh manically after burying an unsuspecting opponent, it was easily my favourite part of the experience. Another twist put on the mutiplayer in *The Line* are sandstorms. During multiplayer matches a sandstorm will hit the map and significantly decrease movement speed and visibility it add a neat layer of challenge while trying to stay alive. *Pro tip*: When the storm hits get inside and wait for some unsuspecting opponent to walk by a window and fill them with sand coated lead. Despite the added twists in the multiplayer I don't really feel that it's compelling enough to keep players coming back for more, but I did enjoy it enough to justify the game's price tag.

It is obvious that the narrative and story in *The Line* are crafted with an exceptional amount of care



The Right Direction

Spec Ops: The Line is a tough game to judge, while I found the story and narrative design to be top notch, the overall gameplay did leave something to be desired. I would love to see more of these serious stories told in first or third-person action games but there is hardly anything really innovative about *The Line's* gameplay. The sand mechanics were good but not enough to really jump up and shout about. While I didn't have any serious problems with the visuals or gameplay, I have a hard time raving about these elements. However I will praise the games story for many months to come. Walt Williams and the teams at Yager and 2K have really succeeded in creating a gritty and compelling experience and they should be commended for their excellent work on this title. However at the end of the day it's gameplay that keeps players coming back. If you have any interest in games that tell a serious, evocative, compelling story than *Spec Ops: The Line* is a must play. However, I do feel that everything I enjoyed about the game will fly right over the heads of the "frat boy" *Call of Duty* crowd. *The Line* should be taken as an example as how to craft a serious and well written story in an action game. This is what modern military shooters need to do to evolve and stay relevant. Big scripted action scenes that are reminiscent of a Michael Bay film have been done to death by action games and it's time to move the genre into some more artistic territory. In my opinion *The Line* has not only succeeded in this regard, but excelled. It's time for games to tell the stories of the hell and drama that soldiers experience on the battlefield rather than America being invaded by the Russians for the 900th time. C&G

SPEC OPS
THE LINE

SECOND LOOK

SAM CHEUNG - EDITORIAL INTERN

The narrative is what makes *Spec Ops: The Line's* story about is what sets it apart from a number of other shooters. Unfortunately, *The Line's* gameplay is very similar than much the Gameplay is enjoyable, although not innovative. The sandstorm environment was a promising element but it is limited to being a simple environmental hazard. The sequence of Dubai is mostly fully controlled between the run which was a wasted opportunity on the part of the developers. While the story is extremely well-written, the [illegible] gameplay can't help but be constructed, leaving little actual choice. A string of bad decisions takes [illegible] the conclusion.

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DARKSIDERS 2

REVIEW BY: Wayne Santos

SYSTEM: PS3, Xbox 360, PC **DEVELOPER:** Vigil Games **PUBLISHER:** THQ **ESRB:** M

75 / 100

Death Takes A Holiday

The first *Darksiders* came out in the summer of 2010 and surprised everyone by being a decent, *Zelda*-esque romp through a post-apocalyptic world as imagined by comic artist Joe Madureira. It was a game that was as much about puzzles, exploration and getting new gear/abilities for further puzzle solving and exploration as it was about the third-person, brawling action in tradition of *God of War*. Well, now the sequel is here, and it has jettisoned the previous hero, the Horseman of the Apocalypse War, for his slightly less beefy, more morose sibling Death. And in some ways, *Darksiders II* may just be better than its predecessor. *If* it gets patched.

Don't Fear The Reaper

Darksiders II starts things off with a surprising—and not entirely convincing—sidetrack to justify the switch over to a new character. It takes place sometime during the introduction of the first game, when War was in limbo, awaiting trial from a celestial governing body known as the Charred Council for supposedly initiating apocalypse and ending humanity without authorization. His brother, Death, takes exception to this, convinced it's a frame up, and decides the best way to solve the problem of War being accused of killing humanity is... to bring humanity back. Being Death, you'd imagine this would be a straightforward task, but no; after beating the secret out of The Keeper of Secrets, Death is told that the key to bringing humanity back may lie with the Tree... of Life. And off he goes to lands far and strange in his quest to absolve his brother. This is classic, 90s Image Comic writing at its "best" with meaningless names, questionable motives and entirely forgettable and disposable dialogue that strings together the usual "go here, solve this and kill that" gameplay that is the true strength of *Darksiders II*. It won't win any awards, but it may amuse some with how earnest—and yet juvenile—the writing is. If you were 14 years old and had no background in mythology—or even Vertigo comics of the 21st century—this would be mind-blowing stuff for sure. As is, it stumbles onto the stage with awkward intensity and utters its lines with a crack in its voice and sandbags falling to the ground behind it, but *hey*, the show must go on.

The visuals are exactly what you'd expect from an emeritus of Wildstorm Comics, with that big, boisterous, 90s sensibility to the imagery that looks great and is in no way plausible. Buxom female characters stand at sexy yet unrealistic angles for their legs, while men sport muscles that should make it physically impossible to pick up anything on a table in front of them. *Darksiders II* follows in the tracks of its predecessor with colourful environments that avoid the plague of brown and grey splattered over most games. They are stylish, landscapes, and they maintain a consistent, original style. The stability of the graphics is, for the most part, reliable, with good framerates during all but the most hectic, enemy-ridden combat, and little in the way of the collision detection glitches or other visual snafus that would break the mood of the graphics. It's not realistic looking game, but don't take that as a knock, it's not meant to be. It feels like wandering around in an Image comic book, and that's a good thing.

The sound is mostly a success, though it feels a little economical. On the one hand the Michael Wincott (a.k.a. Top Dollar in *The Crow*) as Death brings a sincere—if trademark gravelly—performance to every moment in the game. All the actors do a good job of grounding these mythic, larger than life characters, which is no small feat with a roster of angels, demons and beings that have participated in the creation of the universe. On the other hand the music makes some unusual—and decidedly

budget—choices, with an accompaniment that often feels Asian in tone, and sounds like the earnest compositions of an 80s synth musician who has recently discovered the joys of the Yamaha DX-7. A lot of games these days now enjoy enough of a budget that full orchestral accompaniment is almost standard in the fantasy genre. *Darksiders II* doesn't enjoy this, although it's a genuine toss up whether this was a deliberate choice for a different sound, or an actual financial limitation. Whatever the case, some may find the more subtle, synth-heavy tracks inappropriate. The actual sound effects themselves are mostly taken from the first *Darksiders* with the same cues present for unlocking significant puzzles. This isn't really much of a complaint, although the combat effects don't sound quite as punch as they could; a surprise considering just how much punching, stabbing, impaling and clubbing actually occurs.

The High Cost Of Living

If the first *Darksiders* was a weird hybrid of *God of War* with *The Legend of Zelda*, then the sequel continues this ill-fitting tradition, as a hybrid of *Prince of Persia: Sands of Time* and *Diablo*. With a little bit of that *GoW* and *Zelda* vibe still mixed in. That sounds like a recipe for disaster, but amazingly, Vigil has pulled it off.

The first thing that players should know is that this is essentially an Adventure-RPG with an action component, pretty much in that order. Exploration is the order of the day, massive worlds filled with mandatory and optional dungeons to explore, invoking the *Zelda* mechanic of rewarding players with new tools/abilities that allow them access to portions of areas that were previously inaccessible. The big twist here is how much of an emphasis has been put on environmental puzzles. Players will usually start at point A, and clearly see point B, somewhere in the distance with an extremely convoluted and vertical solution needing discovery to get there. Wall runs, bouncing between parallel walls and traversal up sheer surfaces because of conveniently placed grips are all the order of day here, much like in *PoP*. Occasionally the *Zelda* component reminds you it's still there with the requirement of a tool to solve puzzles, but mostly the real challenges here come from your ability to navigate.

And then there is that *Diablo* element. Yes, there is loot. *Lots* of loot. And it has stats, is coloured coded from white font for common, to purple for *l33t* and gold for unique. One of better tweaks to this system is the ability to occasionally come across "possessed weapons" which have unimpressive stats, but can be upgraded by "sacrificing" existing weapons which then boost stats and add new properties, even allowing players to name the new weapon. It's a clever way to keep old loot from being totally useless, and allows players to feel a certain attachment for that hammer or scythe that has been with them for so many hours due to its ability to keep up with them as they advance. Loot is randomly dropped from enemies and randomly generated from treasure chests. So that peculiar itch from *Diablo* and *Borderlands* is present here, with a new piece of armour or weapon that manages to temporarily

scratch said itch with better stats... until an hour passes and you want another. This is compounded by the original RPG-lite mechanics from the previous game, with XP, leveling, and the selection of skills and abilities as you advance, all while still letting players swing a scythe and an additional secondary weapon (they come in hammer, axe, staff and claw varieties) in a series of simple combos that Kratos would be proud of.

That's not to say that the crazy mix of gaming elements works perfectly, but the fact that it works at all is an impressive feat. The simpler *GoW*-inspired combat is still not as finely tuned as its obvious inspiration, lacking the sense of brutal contact Kratos is best known for. The loot and the various drop rates are uneven, so the trickle of better weapons and armour can be unpredictable with a long dry spell that suddenly turns into a flood of better gear. And the *PoP* style mechanics are so close in their resemblance to the Prince's antics that it almost borders on trademark infringement. There are also occasional, unpredictable difficulty spikes in both combat and puzzle complexity that can sometimes throw players for a loop. But these are rare, though significant blemishes, and can easily be forgiven in a game that otherwise offers upwards of 30+ hours of entertainment for people that are willing to plough through the story and its optional side quests, looking for all the collectibles scattered throughout the various worlds. It's a fun, if slightly fragmented, ambitious and sprawling adventure that is a perfect antidote to not having anything to play during the summer months. So why am I not giving it a higher score?

I have to dock points because of one major problem. There is a game breaking bug—at least in the Xbox 360 version of the game—that is unavoidable, and prevents completion of the game. At the time of this writing, since the game's not out yet, there is no patch for this, but I encountered a surprising error deep into the late game that caused the game, without fail, to crash whenever I entered a portion of a dungeon that was necessary to advancing the plot. This in itself is bad, but when that crash also occurs as the game attempts an autosave, then a corrupted save file is the inevitable result, and that's exactly what happened to me, after over 30 hours of play. The fact that such a fundamental bug managed to escape the QA process at Vigil makes me suspect they probably use the same crew as Bethesda. I can't speak for the PS3 version, and I can't even speak for the 360 version on launch day, but I can say right now that if this game had actually worked for me that way it was intended, my score would easily be an 87.

As it is, it's hard to enthusiastically recommend a good game to players if you know that game will inevitably crash on them. As such, it gets a 75. With any luck, such game breaking bug will be patched in short order, and *Darksiders II* will enjoy the sales that a game of this quality—if it works—so richly deserves. This is a perfect game for summer if it doesn't crash on you. C&G

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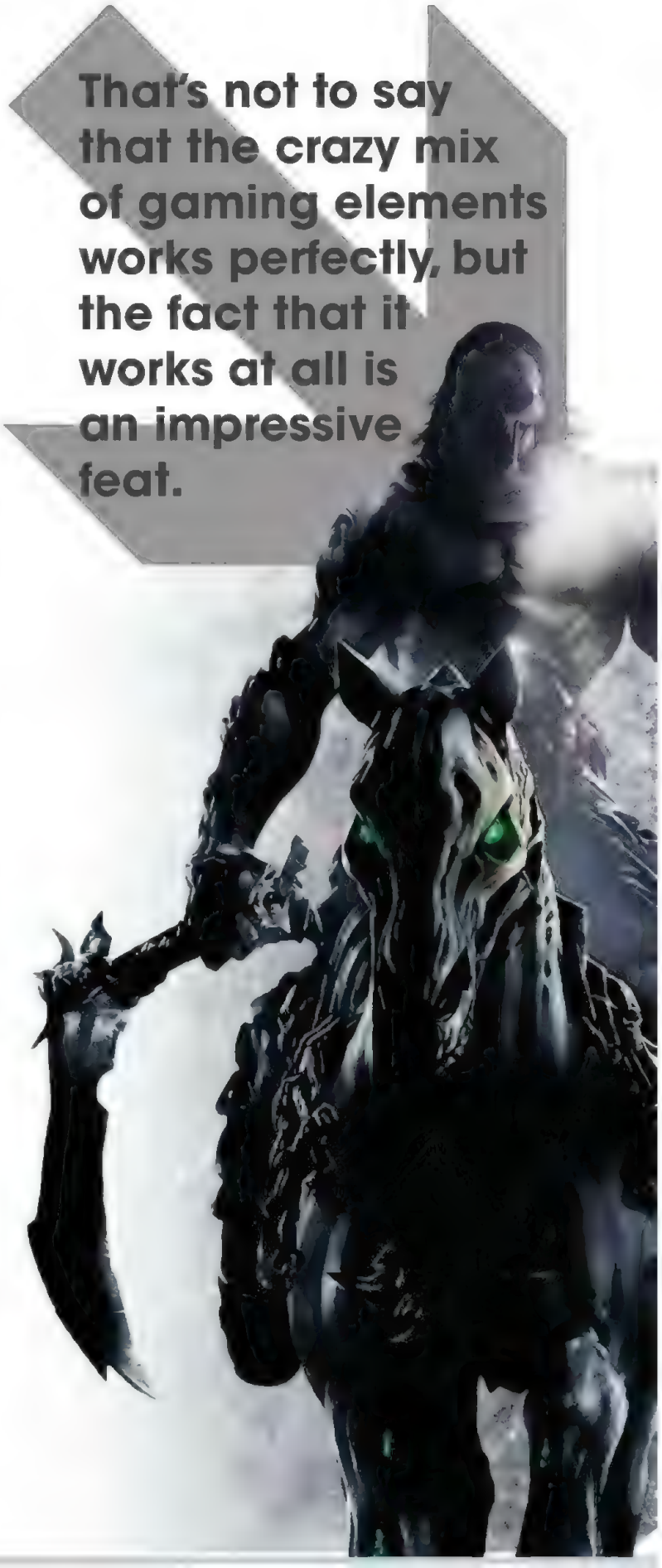

DEADLIGHT

REVIEW BY: Brittany Vincent

SYSTEM: Xbox 360 **DEVELOPER**: Tequila Works **PUBLISHER**: Microsoft Studios **ESRB**: M

78 / 100

Deadlight is a side-scroller that sandwiches the shambling undead between an ambitious campaign and dark narrative, topping things off with a delectable glaze of melodrama. It conjures earlier adventures like *Shadow Complex* and *Limbo*, but never fully commits to either style. It's an enjoyable enough trip through the textbook trappings of zombie apocalyptica, but when the journey comes to an end we surmise you'll be left wanting a little more.

"Shadows" are lurking everywhere, and when you least expect it their numbers only seem to multiply. It's your job to guide Randall through numerous rundown, dreary urban areas to hopefully be reunited with his family and possibly other survivors.

It's all fairly standard stuff. If you're a horror buff or even a zombie enthusiast you'll have lived through these very same scenarios many times over, even if only in your mind. *Deadlight* allows you to explore the fantasy by having you scavenge and survive the zombie-riddled wasteland by way of side-scrolling platforming. Utilizing an art style similar to that of *Limbo* where Randall is nearly silhouetted against the muted greys and darker earth tones of the background, you're immersed in a decidedly depressing world. You'll mostly move from left to right and occasionally from the background to the foreground in order to reach point B from point A.

Usually it's best to sprint as long as you can, as long as your stamina bar will allow, to simply flee from any advancing zombies, as facing them one-on-one (or three or four on one, as is usually the case) is not the best course of action. When trying to combat the zombies, Randall's sluggish melee combat is a deal breaker. Aiming is a chore that never becomes any less of one, no matter how many times you pick up a firearm. And swinging an axe is not enough protection when you're on the run from six or seven of the undead. That's why it's better to try to do your best parkour expert impression and shimmy up ladders, leap from ledge to ledge, and take bounds between rooftops to keep away from the danger below.

The Shadows can and will lunge at you from time to time, quite unexpectedly. Do not engage them unless you absolutely have to – you'll find out very quickly that you're only inviting a swift death, as they are faster and stronger than you, and the way you swing an axe or handle a weapon, you're simply no match for them. This actually doesn't make much sense, considering these creatures are supposed to be undead – you should be able to lop limbs and heads off left and right, then scuttle up a ladder to safety. We know, for the sake of the game your abilities have been weakened to up the tension level, but combat is frustrating and slow, especially if you pick up a gun. Just forget about – even the miniature in-game tutorial is more tedious than it should be.

While it gets repetitive, there's still something exhilarating about the constant feeling of being on the run and being forced to re-evaluate your escape plan over and over, even if it does make for some frustrating moments here and there.

Puzzles are quite rudimentary button pushing and crate-pulling affairs, and rarely will you ever be stumped as long as there are action triggers abound to make note of. Collectibles are littered about each area, like pages of Randall's diary and other personal belongings, but other than that there isn't much going on in-game beyond brief comic book styled cut scenes and the clipped segments of narrative interspersed with gameplay.

Platforming is easily *Deadlight's* biggest strength, and it does this with the greatest of ease. Where normally I would be annoyed with the constant acrobatics, running leaps, and wall jumping, it felt so natural here that I found myself looking forward to these things the most. There was a simple thrill in going into an abandoned garage, trapping some undead baddies beneath a car, and zipping up a ladder to start again, all the while avoiding the zombies like the plague. It kept me coming back for more, even when disgusted with the otherwise annoying aiming mechanics and samey feel to the story.

That's what *Deadlight* is — a familiar and comfortable platformer that attempts a new spin on the same story we've heard before, only with a different aesthetic. It's certainly far from perfect, but it's a perfectly serviceable and intriguing adventure that you might truly enjoy if you're into the games mentioned previously or you've been bitten by the zombie bug. For future outings, perhaps Tequila Studios' first order of business may be to forage for some updated narrative concepts — with the right ammunition, their next project could be killer. C&G

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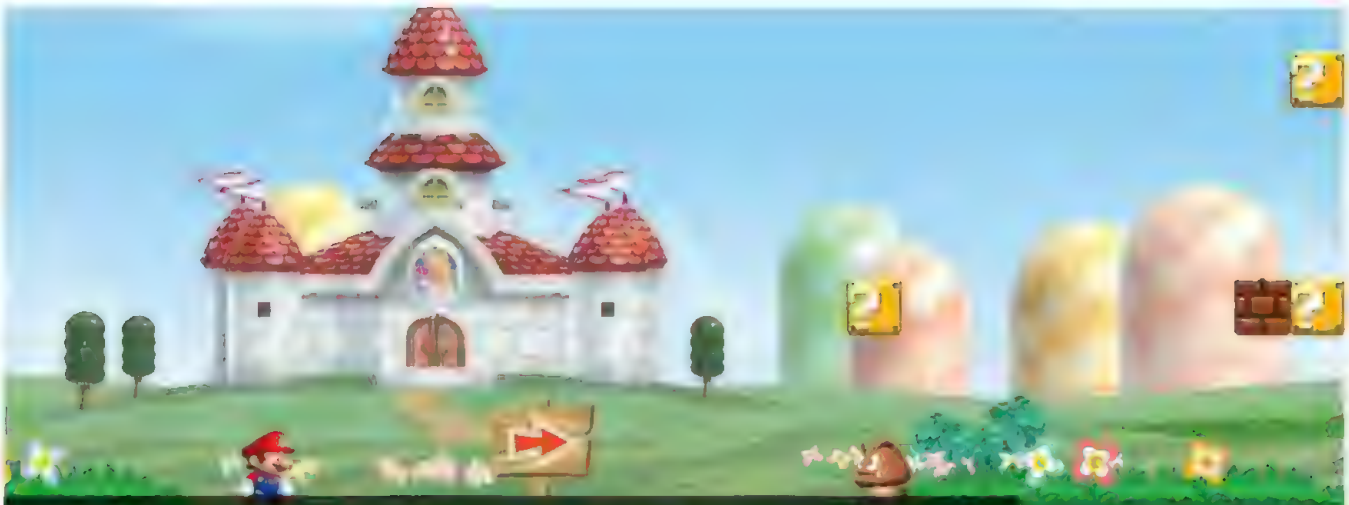


New Super Mario Bros. 2

REVIEW BY: Phil Brown

SYSTEM: 3DS **DEVELOPER:** Nintendo **PUBLISHER:** Nintendo **ESRB:** E

85/100

It was a bit of a shocker when Nintendo pulled *New Super Mario Brothers 2* out of their hat right before E3 this year and planned on launching it within a few months. New entries in the plucky plumber's ongoing battles with Bowser are usually teased out for a least a year. Yet all of a sudden here was the first side-scrolling Mario adventure for Nintendo's new handheld system. Now that I've gotten a chance to play through the game, well it's not that much of a surprise anymore. Considering that this franchise is known for honouring and reinventing itself with each new entry, this thing feels surprisingly predictable. Now, it's still Mario. The game plays like a dream and offers hours upon hours of addictive platforming entertainment. Nintendo has just done such an impressive job of constantly raising the bar for their beloved mascot over the years that more of the great gameplay we already love can't help but feel like a slight letdown.

Now, dear readers, I'd like you to go ahead and guess what the set up for this latest Mario adventure is. Did you do it? Guess what? You're right. Bowser kidnaps Princess Peach and Mario has to go get her. Who'd have thunk it?! There are six main worlds he'll have to travel through with all the usual settings (desert, water, snow, etc). Each world has a midway castle ruled by those familiar fire-breathing triceratops and a main castle with one of Bowser's bumbling Kooplalings in need of a boot to the head. Add on the three secret worlds and all the expected hidden stages and you're looking at about 80 levels to get through. The tanuki suits return after their *Super Mario 3D Land* resurrection (both the regular and the invincible gold addition that you have access to only if you embarrass yourself and die too many times in a given level), along with the usual fire flowers. The giant mushroom that makes Mario and invincible block basher as large as the screen has a couple quick appearances as well, which is nice because that thing is pretty damn fun on the DS and was must missed in *New Super Mario Brothers Wii* (although none of the suits and power ups from that game appear here, probably to save them for the upcoming Wii U addition to the franchise).

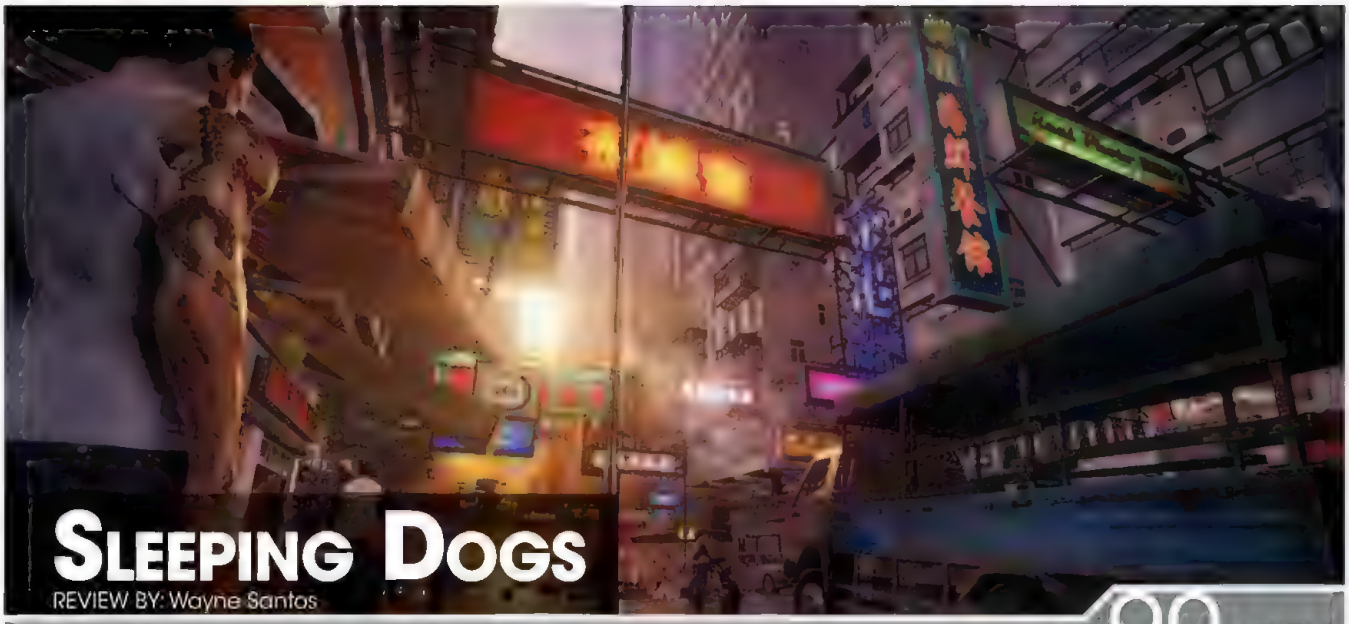
When it comes to the new suits n' powers, well, it's all based on coins. The big one is a golden flower that makes Mario gold and shoots out giant fireballs that turn pretty well anything onscreen into coins. The smaller new addition is the coin block that Mario wears on his head and leaves a trail of coins wherever he runs. Coins are everywhere in this game, even when you aren't playing with the new powers. Unless you're a particularly unskilled Mario player, you'll be up to 100 lives in no time and earning a "game over" screen would require serious effort. Your coin total is diligently counted on the main menu, with notices every time you reach a new milestone. There's also a new coin-based mini-game called Coin Rush that allows you to compete against bots or human players (via streetpass) by replaying every level in the game trying to get the highest possible coin total. It's fairly entertaining and helps increase replay value, which is actually pretty important on this particular title.

Completing all of the main levels will only take you about four hours or so. The usual star coins and hidden secrets still apply, yet the overall challenge level of *New Super Mario Bros 2* is surprisingly low. I know this franchise is all about pick up n' play accessibility, but aside from a few secret levels there's really nothing here that won't take longer than a few passes to beat. Normally these games have a gradually increasing level of difficulty that starts out a joke and turns into a split-second timing nightmare. Not so much this time. It's all fairly quick n' painless. Perhaps the simplified level design was done to accommodate Coin Rush runs, but that mode is not entertaining enough in and of itself to add

much to the life of this title. Even the co-op multiplayer mode that added so much to *New Super Mario Bros Wii* feels tacked on and not really worth the effort. This is a very short game and doesn't come close to toppling *Super Mario 3D Land* as the best Mario game on the 3DS.

In a way, it's appropriate that *New Super Mario Bros 2* is the first 3DS retail game that's available as a downloadable title. This feels more like an eShop game than a retail title and isn't worth the sticker price. $25 at the eShop is about right, but chances are it will cost more. The game is so low on new content that it feels like leftover levels and ideas from the previous *New Super Mario Bros* and Nintendo is saving all of their new ideas for the Wii U. Even the 3D is oddly useless. I'm not sure if Nintendo thought fully 3D backgrounds would be distracting or what, but if you turn on the 3D the background goes out of focus. Turn it of and the backdrops are clear. Now, there's still depth between Mario and the blurry background, just so little that this is a 3DS title better suited to 2D gameplay. I'm not sure what happened there. It's almost as if this was a DS title given a last minute 3D polish.

Here's the thing though. While all the complaints I just rattled off are entirely true and this title is certainly not in the running for the Best *Mario* Game Of All Time honours, it's still easily the best 2D platformer available on the 3DS. Nintendo took the "if it ain't broke, don't fix it" approach this time and why not? As familiar as the game is, all those recognizable elements still combine for a hell of a lot of entertainment. There's a reason why Mario platformers have been around for 30 years, after all. Pick this thing up at the eShop for the reduced price and you'll still kill plenty of hours on your various commutes. If you can only buy one Mario game for the 3DS, it should still be *Super Mario 3D Land*. Honestly, the only sin that the folks behind *New Super Mario Bros 2* committed was settling on a great, classic Mario experience rather than taking risks on something new. That said, if I had to choose between playing a new and familiar *Mario* game right now or having to wait a few years before the next ingenious sequel...well...that's not much of a choice at all. Buy it. Enjoy it. Just have reasonable expectations. C&G



Sleeping Dogs

REVIEW BY: Wayne Santos

SYSTEM: PS3, Xbox 360, PC DEVELOPER: United Front Games PUBLISHER: Square Enix ESRB: M 90/100

狗

A Better Gaming Tomorrow

What a torturous and circuitous route *Sleeping Dogs* has taken to finally land on retail shelves. First called *Black Lotus*, and started almost straight after Vancouver-based United Front formed, the stewards of the studio, Activision, decided the game might sell better with more brand name recognition. So they attached it to the *True Crime* series, which ended up being a mistake when the first game in the planned franchise didn't sell too well. This had a trickle-down effect on *True Crime: Hong Kong* as it was being called, and eventually the game was cancelled by Activision. Enter Square Enix, and suddenly the game is back on after all, only now it's called *Sleeping Dogs*, and you know what? Even if Activision wasn't confident about the sales numbers, they should have had more confidence in the game itself.

Police Story

If you're old enough to remember the wave of Hong Kong cinema that caught the West by surprise in the 90s with an influx of names like John Woo, Yuen Woo Ping and Chow Yun Fat, then you'll be right at home with *Sleeping Dogs*. The story centers around Wei Shen a Chinese cop who has returned from America to Hong Kong. He's had a score to settle with organized crime ever since the drug-related death of his sister. Now, as a volatile yet promising Asian-American cop with the San Francisco police, he's been loaned to the Hong Kong department to use childhood connections with the current crop of up and coming Triad bosses to go undercover and get deep into the organization in a way previous HK officers failed to do, usually at the cost of their lives. The problem is, when you're hanging out with old childhood acquaintances, and they end up being somewhat decent human beings with a sense of brotherhood and honour, the lines between right and wrong can blur. That's the essential conflict Wei Shen endures as his moral compass wavers during his time as an undercover officer in Hong Kong.

Like Hong Kong cinema itself, there's nothing particularly original about the plotting of *Sleeping Dogs*. This is a gangster-centric tale, similar to the sort told over and over again in *Grand Theft Auto* or *Mafia* games. What separates it is the locale—only *Yakuza* is a serious competitor—and the obvious Hong Kong cinematic heritage the game is inspired by. For fans of HK cinema, the one thing that's most surprising is that United Front gets it. The loyalties, the sense of family, the camaraderie all have the "authentic" feel of something from a chop-socky or Triad shoot 'em up. It's not complicated, but it's earnest, and ultimately wins over the audience.

Moving on to the graphics, we get just about what you'd expect from a game in the open world genre. There's pop up and draw-in when you're driving around in areas that expose a lot of the horizon while you're driving. The game can occasionally take a hit to the frame rate at the most bizarre times—such as when you're backing up on motorcycle. Once again, being an open world game, don't expect the textures to look as sharp and crisp as something like *Gears of War* or *Uncharted*. Character models don't look all that impressive when you get the camera in close, and this is doubly true for the environment with blurry magazine covers in convenience stores, and posters on walls.

But while *Sleeping Dogs* isn't a technical virtuoso, it's a triumph of authenticity. For people from Hong Kong, or those that have been there, United Front completely nailed it. It's not a street for street recreation of Hong Kong, any more than Liberty City got Manhattan and the other boroughs correct down to the last alley, but

There's nothing quite like an angry Hong Kong driver yelling curses in Cantonese to make you feel like you're not in Kansas anymore.

the atmosphere is true to China's Special Administrative Region. Going to Central will show off a plethora of familiar looking buildings, and even the tile used in the overhead walkways is correct. Taking a jaunt south of Central into what should be the Wan Chai district will yield familiar areas like Lan Kwai Fong and SoHo with its famous Mid-Levels escalator and rat maze of bars, restaurants and shophouses selling bizarre wares. The neon, the green taxi cabs, the automobiles driving on the left side of the road and old temples jammed into the middle of a downtown core... everything that fans of HK cinema, or residents and visitors of the city may have personally experienced has had their essence meticulously captured and put into this game.

The sound is, surprisingly, as much of a triumph for the same reason. The interface sound effects are fairly non-descript in some regards, and cheekily cliché in others, such as the drum and chime that sounds every time you pause the game. The audio effects for the various motors is not particularly convincing—not after *Gran Turismo*—and the audio for gunplay, while taking advantage of a surround sound set up, lacks the punch of a dedicated shooter. So once again, there's nothing technically impressive going on here.

On the other hand, anyone that's ever been to southeast Asia will be stunned to hear that even the birds calling in the trees are the same ones that get on people's nerves in region. The audio authenticity continues with the electronic door chime in convenience stores being a dead ringer for the same one used by a million shops in the region. The radio stations are a marvel, with a mix of original compositions and licensed tracks that capture the global, eclectic nature of the city. Yes, there's a classic rock and pop station that belts out Western music, but there's also a canto-pop easy listening station with original Mandarin songs, and jazzy/folk fusion from Bei Bei, as well as a rap/hip-hop station with examples of Cantonese rap from the city's biggest group 24 Herbs.

The voice acting is not just good for a game, it's also almost ridiculously politically correct. Look at the list of Asian actors attached to the project and you'll see names familiar to the West such as Lucy Liu, and big names from Hong Kong like Edison Chen, or Singapore's Chin Han. As a result, you get a lot of good performances from Asians speaking English, although when some of them—notably the Asian Americans—work some Cantonese into the dialog, the American accent will trip up discerning ears. The street Cantonese that you hear while tooling around Hong Kong however, is both hilarious and unnervingly genuine. There's nothing quite like an angry Hong Kong driver yelling curses in Cantonese to make you feel like you're not in Kansas anymore.

Hard Boiled Open World

Some may be expecting that because *Sleeping Dogs* is an open world game set in Asia, this is basically going to be a *Yakuza* game with Chinese characters instead of Japanese. This would be incorrect. *Sleeping Dogs* has much more in common with games like *Grand Theft Auto* and *Saints Row* than the mini-game obsessed *Yakuza* series, which focuses on a small area, and packs it with an improbable level of activities.

Sleeping Dogs has four main areas, loose recreations of the same areas in Hong Kong though by no means geographically accurate. Northpoint is more a working class, residential area, though still very much with a crowded, downtown feel. Central is the finance and entertainment district, while Aberdeen and Kennedy round out the roster with more harbor and upper class residential feels respectively. From the get-go each area is open to you, there's no gradual access to the world.

Sleeping Dogs operates much like you'd expect from an open world game. There's an overarching story, and there's a wealth of collectibles, side quests (here called "favours") and mini-games to play. Food and drink also offer buffs to the player, so while you may have never given much thought to Chinese herbal tea before, the fact that it offers a damage reduction stat buff will make it a required part of your diet in virtual Hong Kong.

What really separates *Sleeping Dogs* from other titles in the open world genre are the John Woo/Jackie Chan stylings that have been carefully applied to the gameplay mechanics. So yes, there's gunplay, and it's done in slow motion, but there's also leaping from one moving car to another to hijack it in the middle of a freeway, something that requires skill, steady nerves and a steady hand. The driving itself is no slouch either, as United Front takes the arcade driving experience from their previous *Mod Nation Racers* and gives the handling of vehicle physics in this game a lively, more cinematic feel. Parking meters beware once you start drifting around corners in Central. When you're on foot, things are still hectic, with free-running chases over rooftops and through alleys that are reminiscent of Jackie Chan's *Police Story*.

And then there's the melee combat. In almost every open world game, melee is something of an afterthought, with a small array of moves to keep in reserve in case you run out of ammo for your gun. *Sleeping Dogs* takes a cue from *Arkham Asylum* with a simple string of combos, supplemented by a counter-attack system that can be engaged any time you see an enemy flash brightly with a red silhouette. This is a game set in Hong Kong, so of course the expectation is that it won't just be lumbering dudes punching each other. You get your kung fu skills here and it has all the fun and depth of an old school, side-scrolling brawler like *Final Fight* or *Double Dragon*. Different enemies have different tactics, with some being impossible to grapple, others requiring a mix of techniques and some that just need to disarmed and hacked at with their own cleaver. Another wrinkle to the combat is the various environmental take downs. You can do everything from smash people into the aquarium at a night club to... well, let's just say I had no idea how lethal a fish processing warehouse could be until I realized those hooks for tuna are big enough to hold a man.

The missions also have a nicely paced diversity. You'll be running, and you'll be gunning, and there will be car chases, but as an undercover cop, you'll also be planting bugs, safe-cracking and other espionage related activities. The missions, for the most part, employ the basic running, shooting and driving mechanics of the game to good effect while at the same time imparting a rich flavour of the modern orient, which is great change of pace from the usual ancient chinese wisdom ambience that is normally associated with Asia.

If there's any real criticisms to be leveled at the game it's that the shooting, while competent, may be the weakest element in the mechanics. You can take cover and shoot, à la *Gears of War* and you can even slide over countertops with guns blazing in slow motion à la *Max Payne* which itself was inspired the gun theatrics of John Woo, but it never feels as tightly responsive as the melee combat. The game may also be considered a little short by open world standards. You'll still be playing the game for over ten hours, the average playthrough will likely still require at least 12, but Hong Kong is not as big as some games—it doesn't hold a candle to the vast expanse of *Red Dead Redemption*—and it not as chock full of mini-games and other diversions as *Grand Theft Auto IV* or *Saints Row: The Third*.

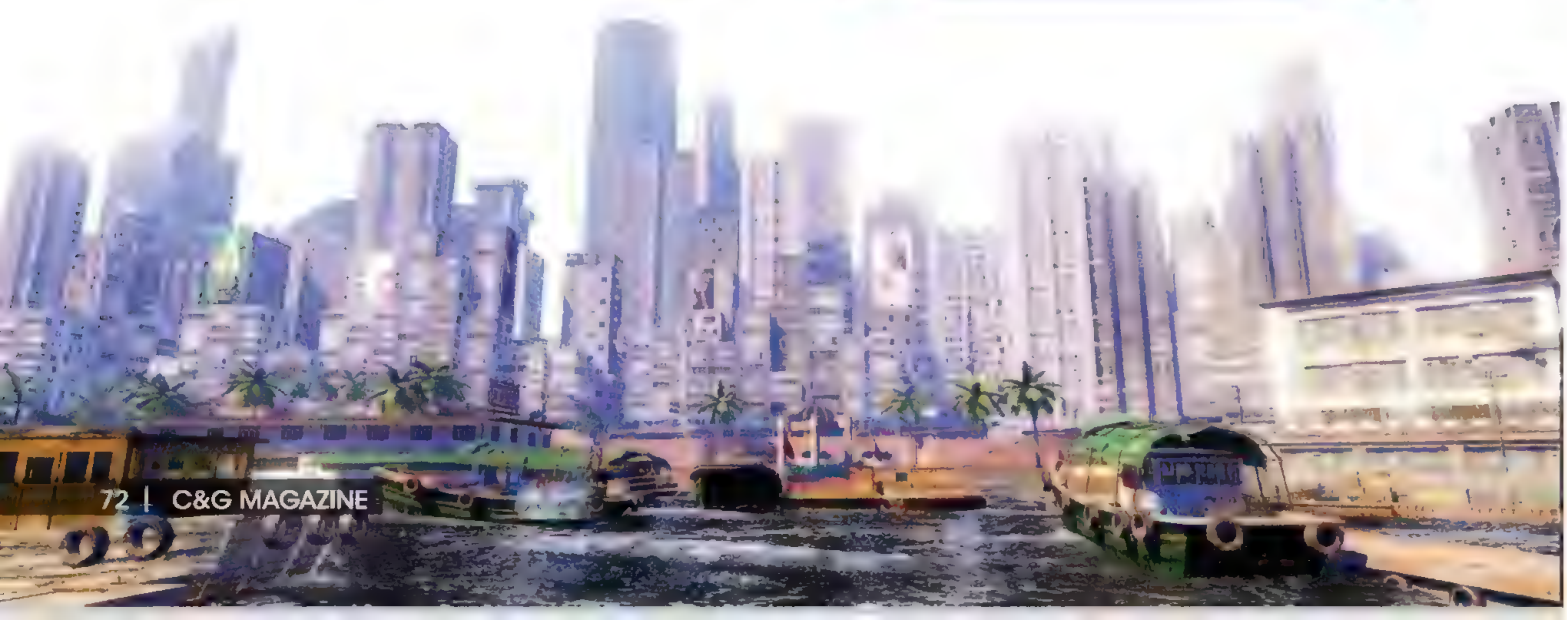
In the end though, I highly recommend this game for most players. If you're an action fan, an open world game fan, or even someone that just wonders what it would be like to visit Hong Kong, this game is a fantastic and surprisingly authentic experience. It's refreshing to see Asians portrayed as they actually are today rather than as period ninjas or kung fu masters. *Kane & Lynch 2: Dog Days* gave players a brief taste of what it was like to briefly wander the streets of Shanghai, but *Sleeping Dogs* lays out the entire city of virtual Hong Kong to explore. The gameplay is great, the story is compelling even if unoriginal, and the attention to detail is jaw dropping. This is like a trip to Hong Kong without the plane fare that includes a license to run over and shoot people. And if you've ever been stuck in a traffic jam in Central, you'll appreciate how desirable that is. This is a must-have summer title for action fans. C&G

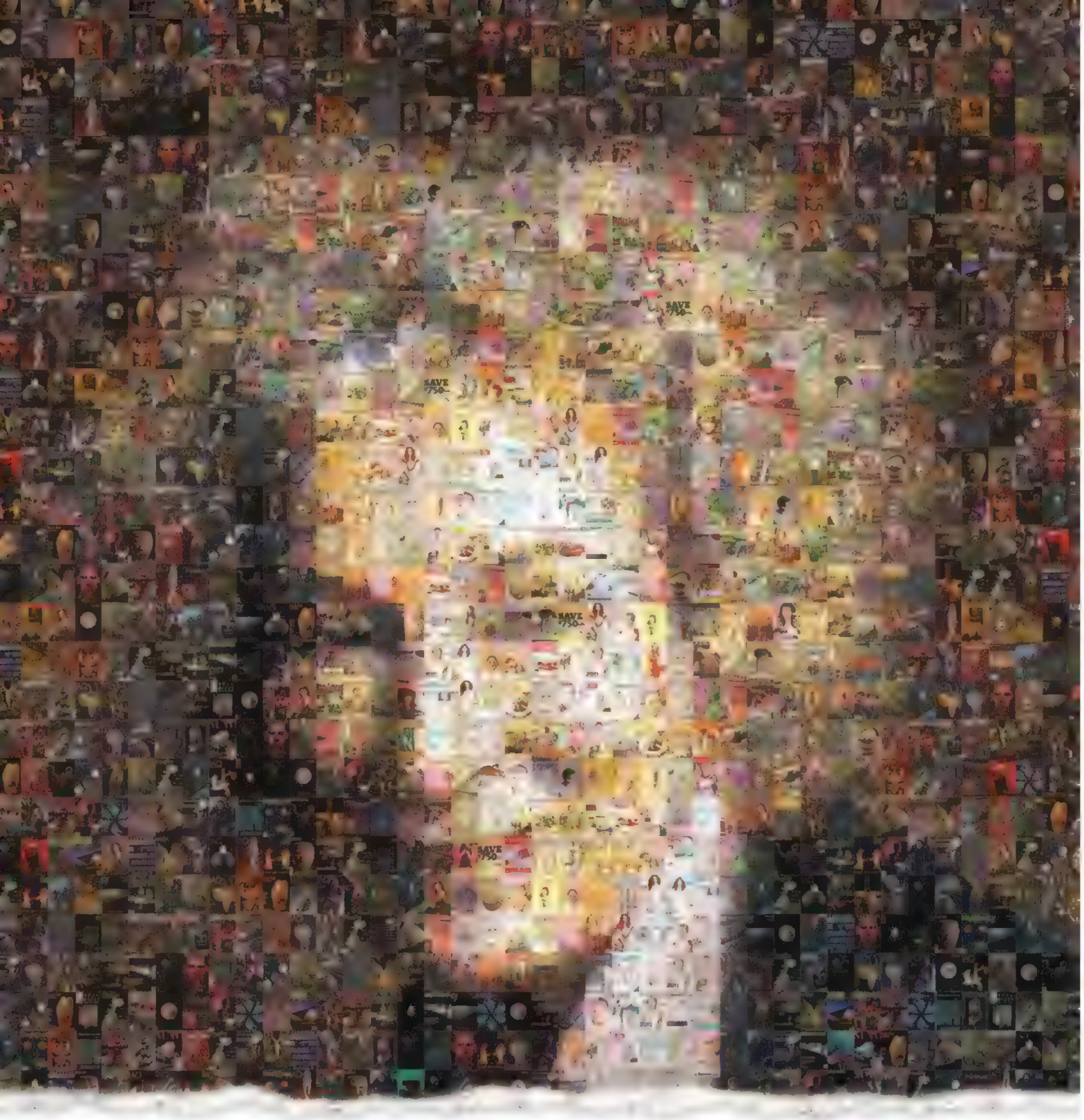
再評睡狗 SLEEPING DOGS

SECOND LOOK AT

Tim Ashdown - Senior Contributor

Sleeping Dogs is a well-built open world where I could lose myself for hours. The fact that guns are hard to come by and most of the combat is hand-to-hand is a welcome change from other open world games. I absolutely loved the environmental attacks which ranged to from the brutal to the hilarious. The only bad thing is that I must now go through life having already felt the elation that comes from beating an assailant with a live fish. After that how can one's existence possibly get any better?





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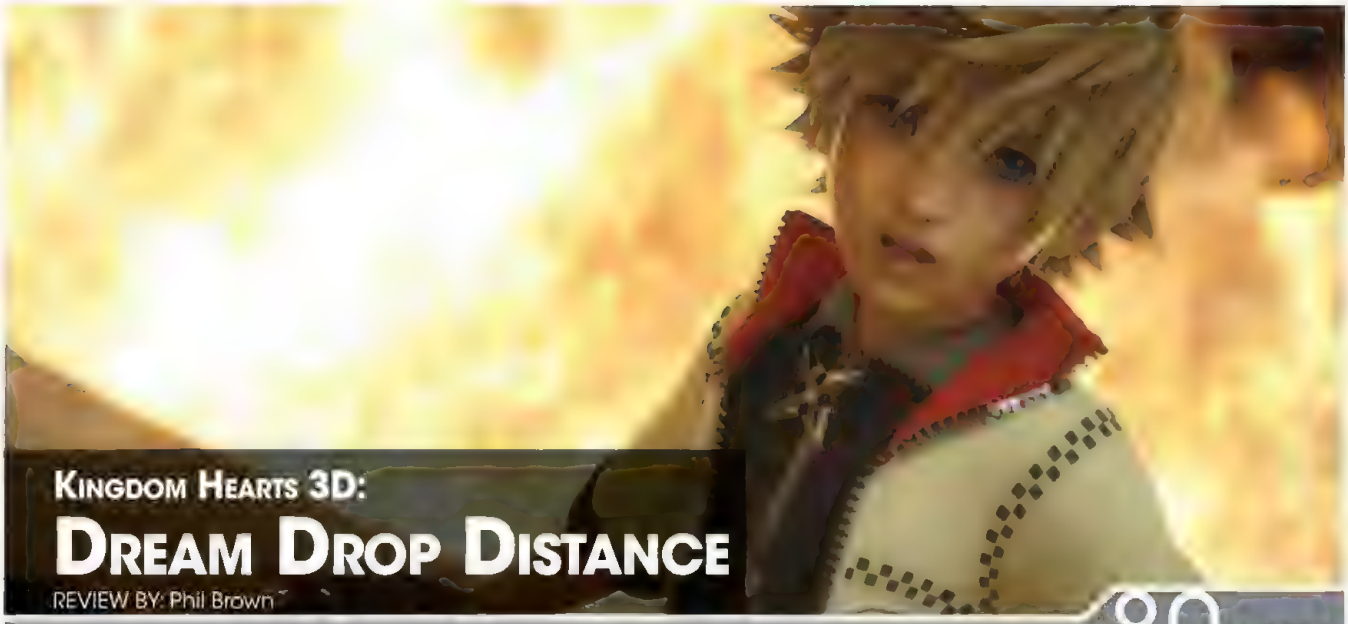


Kingdom Hearts 3D: Dream Drop Distance

REVIEW BY: Phil Brown

SYSTEM: 3DS **DEVELOPER**: Square Enix **PUBLISHER**: Square Enix **ESRB**: E

80/100

Disney and *Final Fantasy*. A combination of the most accessible icons of children's entertainment with possibly the first franchise that required gamers to sacrifice most of their life to properly complete the controller-driven quest. Let's face it, that's an odd combination that really shouldn't work. Yet, we've now arrived at the ten year anniversary of the *Kingdom Hearts* franchise's PS2 debut and while it isn't exactly a series that earned devotion from every single gamer looking for a little electronic vegetation, there is definitely a cult who enjoys seeing Mickey and his giant key sword clutching anime buddies do battles and build up RPG profiles. The latest entry in the series makes few concessions to newcomers (if you want to sort-of understand the plot, you'll have to sit through action-halting cut scenes that attempt to explain everything that's come thus far), but let's face it not many of them were going to come out to play anyways. If you're a fan of the series it's a worthy, if at times mildly disappointing new addition. If you like this genre and never sampled the series before you'll be confused but have a good time. I suppose that's all we ever could have expected. This is a niche title and at least it doesn't kill the good will for what came before is this wacko action RPG Disney adventure series.

First off, this is an absolutely gorgeous 3DS title with some fantastic level and character designs playing off of classic Disney films. It's a nice mix of the iconic 2D designs in 3D forms with levels paying loving homage to vintage classics like *Fantasia* and *Pinocchio* as well as more recent efforts like *The Hunchback Of Notre Dame* and *Tron Legacy*. It's clear the designers had a deep love of the Disney universe and push the horsepower of the handheld system almost as hard as Capcom managed on *Resident Evil*. Simply watching the iconic characters interact with your RPG brawlers is worth the price of admission (unless you hate Disney of course, you sad little person) and to make things even better, the soundtrack for each world is tied to the Disney film in question. At first, there are a couple irritating pop songs in the mix, but once you get to Fantasia land and hear that classical music pumping through the little 3DS speakers while you battle, well it's pure nerdy bliss.

Kingdom Hearts may have imaginative worlds and familiar characters to tickle your pleasure centers as you work your way through the epic quest, but for the most part you're going to be smashing up the adorable villains known as Dreameaters who pop up whenever you go. Combat has all the staples of previous franchise entries like the smashy-smashy keyblade attacks and a drop down menu with magic attack commands that you can upgrade and customize to your heart's content. The big new addition is called flowmotion combat and allows you to bounce around the level during battle for anime inspired fights not too far removed from *The Matrix*. Crazy combos and lighting quick dodges are the backbone of flowmotion and it's a blast to use, even allowing for some high speed level hopping so that the brief sections between battles need not last long. At times can be a wee tough to pull off required moves with split-second timing when you can barely see what's happening amidst the flowmotion lightshow, but it's still huge improvement on previous titles. Platforming can still be frustrating (especially without the ability to properly control camera without the bulky Circle Pad Pro) and bosses can vary from yawn-inducingly easy (spamming out flow-mo combos can usually get the job done) to brain aneurism inducing levels of difficulty. Bosses can be especially tough with the bizarre button layout that requires you to cycle through special attacks with the D-pad while trying to dodge enemy attacks with the circlepad (surely there's a better way!). Ah well, at least the new attack commands are a huge step in the right direction for the series and it's hard to believe flowmotion won't be a part of all future instalments.

Describing the plot is pointless because to be honest, outside of the Disney movie based level tasks, it's difficult to make much sense of this convoluted mess of a mythology. It all has something to do with collecting magic keyblades, I guess. With six games of backstory that the folks at Square Enix desperately try to catch players up on with endless flashback cut scenes and long essay like text-descriptions, making sense of the narrative is an almost futile task. It's best just to focus on the journey of the two heroes Sora and Riku and the occasional bursts of emotion amongst the Disney characters that pop up. Despite the confusion, it is fun to follow these little guys through their twin narratives. Another new addition is that with each character in a parallel world, Square Enix made the odd decision of adding a drop system that forces you flipflop between Sora and Riku throughout the game. A timer enforces the jumps between characters that can be extremely frustrating at first because you'll be pulled out of one game in the middle of intense action and dropped into the other with far less going on. That can be an incredibly disrupting way to play a game, but once you get used to it and try to pick your spots to swap characters, it actually helps keep the parallel stories flowing.

There's a lot to love and a few things to loath about *Kingdom Hearts 3D: Dream Drop Distance* (the title falls into the "loath" category) and thankfully there are enough good things about the game to make it an easy recommendation for fans of the series and genre. You could easy get lost in this thing for hours with customizable dreameater buddies to have at your side that can not only be collected and upgraded, but need to be pet, nurtured, and cared for in an odd *Nintendogs*-style mini game that uses the 3DS' cameras to make it seem like the creatures are in your living room. In addition to the constant combat, there are also a few mini games like a gorgeous on-rails drop race that occurs every time you enter a new level and (wait for it) some light-bike racing in the *Tron* world guaranteed to warm your guilty, geeky *Tron*-loving heart. In the end, the narrative is so confusing and the style of gameplay so long and complex that this can't be recommended to casual gamers. However, if you like the series or just enjoy action RPGs and Disney, it's definitely worth a look. The lovingly crafted Disney characters and world are so charming and immersive for fans that it's enough to forgive all the flaws. I mean, how could you not love being in thrown the middle of *The Sorcerer's Apprentice* (don't worry, not the Nicolas Cage version) with Mickey in 3D and a full score pumping? Any in-game frustrations are worth it for that alone. And don't forget, if you're a Disney fan who loves the sound of those moments but despises this series and/or RPGs, the side-scroller Epic *Mickey: Power Of Illusion* is only a few months away and based purely on the trailers it's going to make every Disney lover shit a brick. *Kingdom Hearts 3D* is fun for now, but let's face it, the big House Of Mouse game of the year is yet to come. CG

Once you get to Fantasia land and hear that classical music pumping through the little 3DS speakers while you battle - well it's pure nerdy bliss.

Persona 4 Arena

REVIEW BY: Scott Dixon

SYSTEM: PS3, Xbox 360 **DEVELOPER**: Arc System Works **PUBLISHER**: Atlus **ESRB**: T

90 / 100

If you haven't played a lot of versus fighting games or JRPGs, then you might feel a little lost in the story and gameplay of *Persona 4 Arena*. But being lost isn't always a bad thing. If you give *Arena* the time it needs to explain itself, you'll get much more out of it than you would expect. Atlus is bringing the fully-flushed story and Arc Systems is bringing the fully featured fighting game mechanics. Both parties are here in force and the only people it will leave behind are those not willing to put the twenty to thirty hours into the story that the game demands. For those with interests in previous Arc System styled games like *BlazBlue* and *Guilty Gears*, you're already excited for this. Perhaps this will even be the title that brings Arc System Works to its rightful place beside Capcom and SNK as far as fighting games. For longtime *Persona* fans, and those who appreciate the odd stories Atlus has to tell, à la *Catherine* - you will get be getting exactly what you want. For everyone else - this may take a little bit of convincing - but there is gold underneath all the spiky hair and teenage angst.

The Art of Fighting

Arena starts you off with a very thoroughly constructed tutorial. There is a lot going on in *Persona 4 Arena*, and you'll get a much better grasp of the mechanics if you take the time to fully sit through it. You won't realize it till it's over - but just believe me, you'll need it. From there you're open to the story, and this is where Atlus starts to take the reins. Characters start locked and you'll have only four to choose from - but there is a method to this, you'll just have the play to see it all. Individual character story lines will take up to an hour or two to play through, ending with anime inspired cliff-hangers that lead right into the newly unlocked characters. From a story-telling point of view - it's phenomenal. The art is absolutely stunning and the music is infectiously good as it takes you through the visual novel that is *Persona 4 Arena*. The story is more than serviceable, but when presented in this way the narrative could have been rubbish and I would still be singing its praise. Thrown in are choices you can make to give options for branching paths, spot-on voice acting capturing the anime nature of the series, and a stark and beautiful art direction that wrap the whole package up neatly. Undoubtedly one of the most remarkable parts of *Persona 4 Arena* is how well the game's art struts through all the different scenarios required by it.

So now you're thirty minutes into a fighting game's main story and you have yet to actually throw a punch. Once you have your first encounter, the game changes entirely into an over-the-top visual assault of an Arc System Works fighting game. Sporting some of the finest hand-drawn sprite artwork I've witnessed, the game run beautifully. *Arena* is based around a four button fighting system and works very well with an arcade stick. The uninitiated will be able to get by the fighting and back to the expansive story with simple button combinations that only lightly graze the fighting system - but for everyone else there is cancelling, countering, and all the benchmarks expected from other fighting games. Your character's 'persona' (that is to say, a manifestation of all the positive aspects of your character) acts as an assist that allows you to extend combos and generally wreak havoc and services to add another level to the complexity of a game that at first glance is much more about the story than the fighting. Staying with the fighting, it is very fast and the style is frantic but overall and most importantly it's tight. You feel like you are in control of the madness, and not just a passenger on a flashy ride through the real heart of what this game is about - the fighting.

Story in my Fighter?

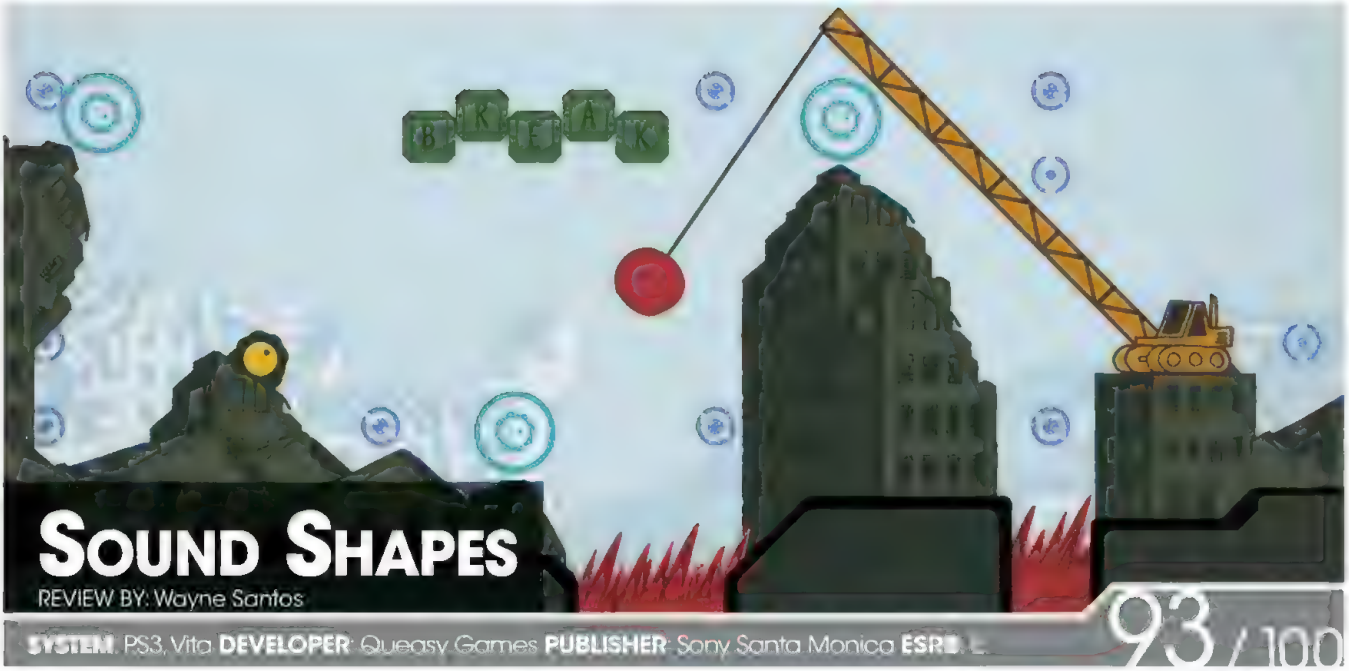
Four or five hours into the main story you'll start to piece together the intricacies of the story. As a companion story to *Persona 4* you would think a knowledge of *Persona 4's* story would serve me well, but this just isn't the case. I go into *Persona 4 Arena* with no previous experience, and I'm gently eased into a story that places great importance on the individual stories of its 13+ characters. Backstories are generously explained through internal monologues that feels much more akin to what I would expect from the RPG iterations of the *Persona* series. The biggest issues players will have with *Persona 4 Arena* will likely be found in the extraordinary amount of narrative exposition you're forced to sift through to get back to the generally very fun fighting mechanics.

Online network play is an absolute requirement in the modern fighting game landscape. *Arena* continues to impress with a full functioned network system that handles latency extremely well. Playing with opponents across the continent and further showed very little disruptions and while I still lost – I will never be able to blame it on lag. There is little to be said about the network experience in *Arena* because it simply works so well. With the option of playing against players from all over the world with little noticeable lag – you'll be fighting versus the best Japanese players, that have already had the game for a couple months.

It's more likely than you think

Persona 4 Arena is currently the fastest selling fighting game in its native Japan, and *Arena* has just now landed in North America with all the hype from the East and two strong development names behind it. *Arena* does not disappoint and definitely makes its mark as a huge success for what would originally be thought as an outlandish cross-over. Whether hardened tournament level fighting game player, or a *Persona* starved otaku - *Arena* will bring both together in a way neither would have thought possible. C&G

One of the most remarkable parts of *Persona 4 Arena* is how well the game's art struts through all the different scenarios required by it.



SOUND SHAPES

REVIEW BY: Wayne Santos

SYSTEM: PS3, Vita **DEVELOPER:** Queasy Games **PUBLISHER:** Sony Santa Monica **ESRB:** E

93 / 100

It must be the water. That's the only explanation I can come up with. There is something being pumped into the water supply of anyone living in Toronto that decides to become an independent game developer. Whatever this stuff is, it fires up the imagination in a way that goes beyond mere technical proficiency and into a strange and frightening land where pure idea and originality rules. How else do you explain the wave of games the city has produced, from *Sword & Sworcery EP* to *Dyad* and now *Sound Shapes* by Queasy Games? Whatever is in the water, it's done Jonathan Mak a lot of good. *Sound Shapes* has finally come out of incubation and there are only four words that describe it; strange, simple, fun and evocative.

The Minimal Game

There's no story to *Sound Shapes*, no characters, no plot, no real context to anything you're doing. It's a pure platformer, with the simple goal of going from left to right in most cases. The graphics are impossible to describe because there is no consistency; this is like a musical version of *LittleBigPlanet*, except that instead of cuteness, music is the star. But in the same way, the levels are created by users, and so they can look like anything; from the expected recreations of *Super Mario Bros.* to "donated" levels by fellow Toronto indie alumni Superbrothers. The range of visuals travels from simple geometric shapes, to sharply defined, stylish icons like something out of an advertising illustrator's playbook. There's a surprising range of visuals available, although the consistent theme throughout seems to be minimal and simplistic. Considering the actual simplicity of the game, this is entirely appropriate.

Sound falls into a similar department, although players need to understand that sound is the clear star of this show. Being a musical platformer, Queasy Games needed to get this right, and provides a huge range of notes rendered through many different filters and "instruments." There are the simple "beeps" and "boops" that one expects from classic retro-gaming, there are more sophisticated notes that invoke the feel of classic club electronica and there are smoother sounds—and even vocals—such as those found in levels with the surprise participation of Beck. The richness of music, and interacting with it is celebrated in this game, and it's all done while doing what gamers have done best for decades; try to get to the end of the level.

Musical Leaps

The premise of *Sound Shapes* is pretty basic. You control a... for lack of better term, a fried egg, sunny side up, that rolls along in a classic, 2D world. The physics of this world are simple; you can roll, jump and stick to most objects except for black coloured objects, and red coloured objects which mean instant death. You have an infinite amount of lives however, and the levels have check points scattered around so you're not always forced to start from scratch upon death.

The goal, while moving from left to right, is to also run across icons littered all over the screen. Doing this activates musical notes that now play in accompaniment to the overall melody that dominates each level. Points are scored for running over each of these icons and combined with the total traversal time through the entire level to determine final score and placement on the leaderboards. And that's it, that's the game really if you're describing it from a purely mechanical perspective.

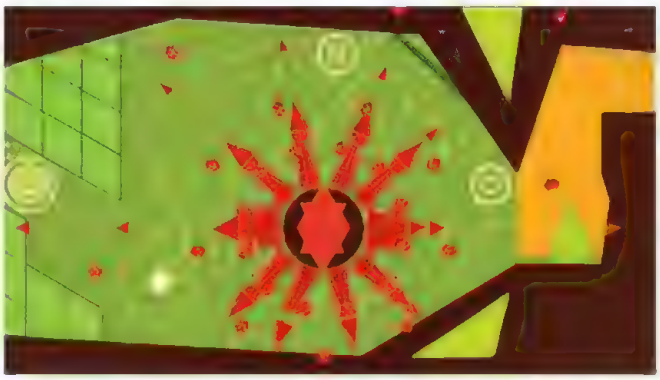
But what that ignores is the sheer, simple fun of *Sound Shapes*. You can tell that is the brainchild of Jonathan Mak, who's previous PSN entry, *Everyday Shooter* was a simple twin-stick shooter in which shooting the various elements added to the overall melody that played in each level. *Sound Shapes* is a larger, more com-

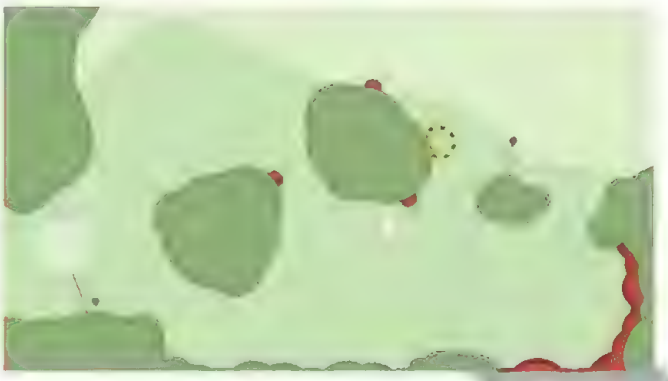
prehensive evolution of that idea with a lot of collaboration from some surprising creators. Playing the game is an exercise in action and reaction, with fun coming not just from the usual gamer conditioning of "beating" a level, but the journey itself as a song changes and becomes more complex, playful or surprising based on what you're doing in your efforts to get to the end.

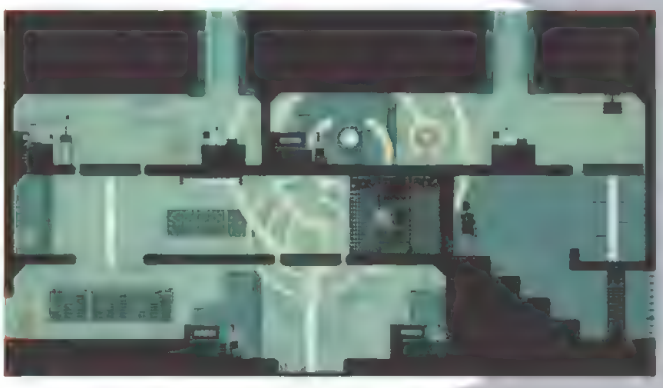
The simplicity of being able to jump, speed up, and stick to most objects creates a wide variety of gameplay possibilities, as seen in the levels contributed by other indie companies like PixelJam and Superbrothers. One level has players negotiating a bleak office setting, trying to figure out how to turn on an elevator, while other levels put the player in environments requiring precise, efficient runs to get off icy platforms before they disintegrate. All the while the music plays in the background, changing and responding to the action on screen because it's all tied to the player's progress. There's something primal and fun about this minimal concept. It's one of the few games of the year that evokes a simple reaction of a smile, or even just thinking "Hey, neat!" while playing. It is a game that is easy to understand, even easier to enjoy, but it also shows a lot of imagination within its simple mechanical premise.

It's also a game that shares the love. Like *LittleBigPlanet*, there is a level creator that is loaded with tools so you can attempt make—and share—your own levels on the PlayStation Network once you're done. Both the PS3 and the Vita are fully enabled for this, but they share some interesting interface differences. For example, being able to use the touch screen to swipe and place objects on screen feels faster and more natural on the Vita rather than the dual analog sticks of the PS3. However, rotating and resizing objects using the rear touchscreen of Vita is not as efficient as just using those same twin sticks on the PS3.

Sound Shapes is a pleasant, summer surprise. It appeals to a more basic, child-like pleasure of doing something cool and hearing something cool in return. The only real downside to the game is that it's short, with only a handful of levels available "out of the box" and the rest relying on the creativity of the community. But, like *LittleBigPlanet*, that also means it's a game with legs. And those legs are multiplatform as the current offer allows customers to buy the PS3 version and get the Vita version free. At $14.99 CAD for two versions of the game, this is another great way to pass the summer days, and if you have a Vita, the bite-sized levels are perfect for a commute, although it's also recommended that you play this one with headphones. Sound is a crucial part of the experience and you don't want to miss out on the audio whimsy. C&G



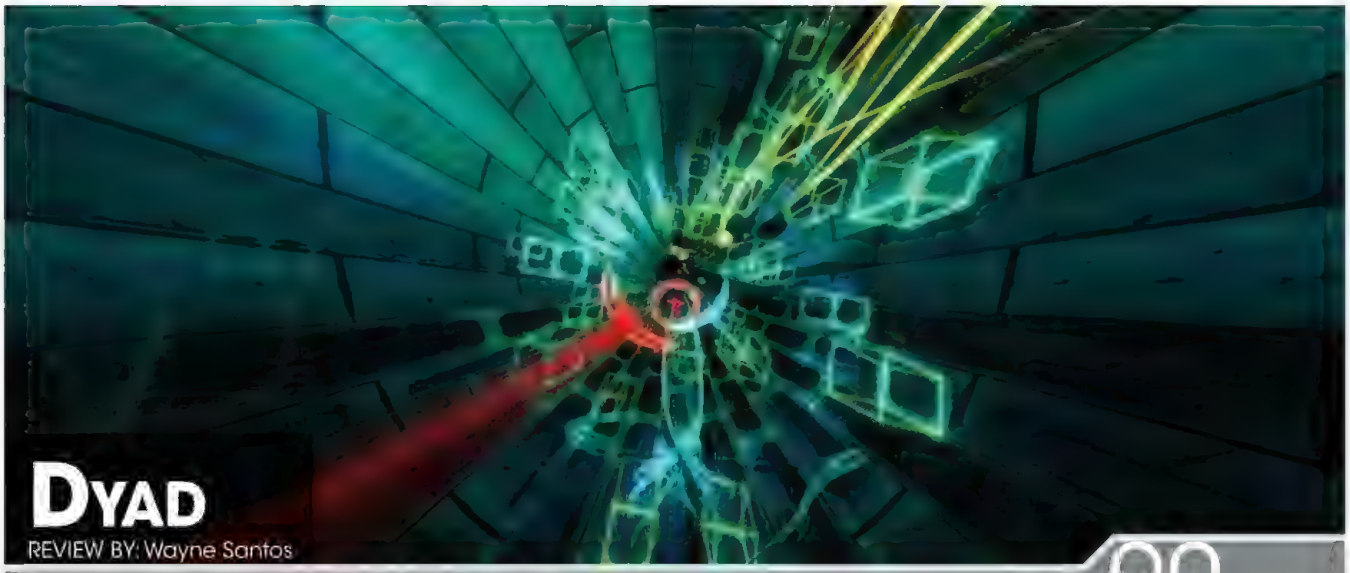




sound shapes second look

Melanie Emile - Corporate Relations

Sound Shapes is a musical platformer which offers a rare style of gameplay, making the experience enchanting and enjoyable. *Sound Shapes* is a title easily recommendable to any age or skill level of gamer.



DYAD

REVIEW BY: Wayne Santos

SYSTEM: PS3 DEVELOPER:][Inc. PUBLISHER:][Inc. ESRB: E

90/100

][Inc. have put their nose to the digital grindstone and cranked out something of a minor miracle; a fast, intense, very much skill-based tunnel running shooter that hearkens back to the 80s arcade era, when story, features and even technology didn't matter in the face of a warp-speed, twitch experience that appealed directly to the predatory, reptilian hindbrain that tracked anything that moves. *Dyad* is a dinosaur of a game, but in a good way. There was a time when gameplay was king, when the idea of bells and whistles on a videogame was almost preposterous simply because games didn't have the technology to handle that. As a result, the attraction of gaming came from whatever premise or concept or mechanic the developers of the time could imagine. Shawn McGrath has a lot of imagination, and he's created a game that's a love letter to the tunnel-running, twitch-based shooters of yesteryear like *Tempest*.

Dyad's core concept is simple. There is a tunnel, and enemies approach you from the distance. You shoot these enemies, but that doesn't destroy them, it merely allows you to "hook" them and pull/boost yourself further and faster into the tunnel, until you get to the end. That's it, that's the game. But as with so many arcade shooters, that "easy to play, difficult to master" mindset ensues as new variations, such as pairing enemies, or building up energy to "lance" them build on the core concept, and before you know it, all manner of gameplay is being thrown at you with increasing levels of frenzy until you hit that fabled Zen State. You know the one; that zone you, as a gamer, can occasionally sink into when you focus so much on the gameplay that your awareness of anything outside the game dissipates and you're a creature of pure action and reaction to the events unfolding on-screen. *Dyad* is one of those games, like *Tetris* or *Tempest* before it, achieves that state.

Graphically, there's little to complain about. McGrath wisely embraces his Indie development heritage and eschews photorealism in favour of something out of William Gibson's conception of cyberspace; abstract, colourful and simple. The tunnel is a series of colours, melting towards the bottom of the screen like a digital acid trip. The player avatar and the enemies are brightly coloured geometric shapes, it all looks like something that might have played across the display of the hacker Case in *Neuromancer*. The sound follows a similar aesthetic, unapologetically synth, embracing its artificiality and reminding older players of a simpler, more hectic gaming space in arcades where beeps and electronic drum beats ruled.

But what *Dyad* gets right more than anything else is the actual play. The controls are tight and responsive, so you can never blame anything except yourself for errors. The initial levels ease players into the core concepts and, if three stars are unlocked, open up the possibilities for specific levels designed for garnering trophies. Leaderboards are, of course, included; this is an arcade game after all, so you'll be wanting to leave your name up there for all posterity until some *Dyad* ninja comes along and decimates your rank an hour later.

This, unlike so many games in the current marketplace, is a videogame in the purest sense of the word. This is old fashioned, tightly designed, brilliantly executed twitch-synesthesia that hasn't been this well presented in years. It doesn't ask players to escape into another life, or overwhelm them with CG spectacle, but instead appeals directly to the part of the brain only cares about movement, action and reaction, and it does it with one of the more elegant feedback loops in quite some time.

The only strike against the game is that there are only five tiers, with a handful of levels to each. But considering the small development team, and how finely tuned the mechanics are, it's understandable. The PSN Summer of gaming has a winner with *Dyad*, and anyone looking for top-tier, arcade experience, be sure to drop the $15.00 CAD for this gem of a tunnel runner. CG

Daredevil by Mark Waid Vol. 1

REVIEW BY: Adam Chapman

Publisher: MARVEL Comics **Released:** August 8, 2012 **Price:** $17.99 CAD

90/100

It wasn't that long ago that I thought I had read my very last *Daredevil* comic. After the Shadowland event, I thought that the character had been ruined, and for the first time in years, I parted ways with the character. When the *Daredevil: Reborn* storyline came out, I decided to give it a pass, no longer interested in the character of Matt Murdock. But then something special happened- I read a preview of Mark Waid and Paolo Rivera's work on the first issue of the newly relaunched *Daredevil*, and I was absolutely hooked. Waid found a way to do what I thought was impossible, bring back Matt Murdock, and apply a lighter, happier approach and tone to the book, without forgetting the darkness that had embroiled the character for the last decade. It's a testament to the way that Marvel prefers to deal with its characters, they don't reboot completely, instead apply a new spin, which doesn't invalidate the old spin, but instead respects the old direction and uses it to spin into a new one. That's exactly what happened with Waid's *Daredevil*, as he manages to recapture the flair and flavour that *Daredevil* had in the pre-Frank Miller days, without forgetting who the character has been since Frank Miller first wrote Daredevil's adventures.

Waid's stories are genuinely fun and enjoyable, with the former adjective one that could never be applied to Bendis, Brubaker or Diggle's runs on the character. The Daredevil presented in these pages is closer to the original swashbuckling version of *Daredevil* Stan Lee originally created, who still deals with the baggage of the past few years, but has decided to try and change how he lives his life, so that he can rise above all of the bad things that have happened to him. Waid doesn't simply let Daredevil do that, however, as he introduces two wrinkles early on, as Captain America doesn't quite trust him, now that he's back, and Matt finds opposition to him in the courts to be quite difficult to fight against. Both discoveries lead the character in new and engaging directions, which help mark just how different this new iteration of the character's adventures is. It reminds me a bit of when Matt Murdock was disbarred, after *Born Again*, and had a free clinic set-up with Karen Page, to help those less fortunate fight for their causes. Waid brings back that do-gooder aspect of Murdock, and it fits well with this lighter, more jovial take on the character. Waid puts Murdock up against Klaw, the master of sound, and after reading it I was stunned that we hadn't seen such a match-up previously, as it makes so much sense, given that Matt's radar functions based on sound, and Klaw is living sound.

Although there's no denying how great Mark Waid's writing has been on this series, it's hard to imagine that it would have been as great a read if not for the amazing talents of artists Paolo Rivera and Marcos Martin. The first couple issues are illustrated by Paolo Rivera, and are perhaps my favourite examples of Rivera's artwork that I've ever seen. He seems to be experimenting with his style, and doing something that resembles Marcos Martin, which makes sense given how Marcos Martin was announced to be the regular artist, after the initial arc by Rivera. Rivera managed to deliver some truly solid issues which have the same tone and sensibility as Marcos Martin's pencils, and so when Martin's issues arrive, there is a seamless transition. Rivera's artwork nails the swashbuckling feel of the script, and the manner in which both he and Martin render Daredevil's radar sense is mesmerizing. Both artists are true masters of storytelling, and every page they illustrate is such a joy to read and look at. Waid's scripts couldn't possibly be in better hands.

The phrase "perfect jumping-on point" has been abused and overused in the comic book medium, but it accurately describe this collection of stories. Whether you're a lapsed fan of *Daredevil*, or even a brand-new fan, this is a perfect collection of stories to really get into Daredevil as a character, and enjoy the brilliant stories by Waid, Rivera and Martin. C&G

Batman: No Man's Land Vol. 3

REVIEW BY: Adam Chapman

Publisher: DC Comics **Released:** August 8, 2012 **Price:** $40.99 CAD

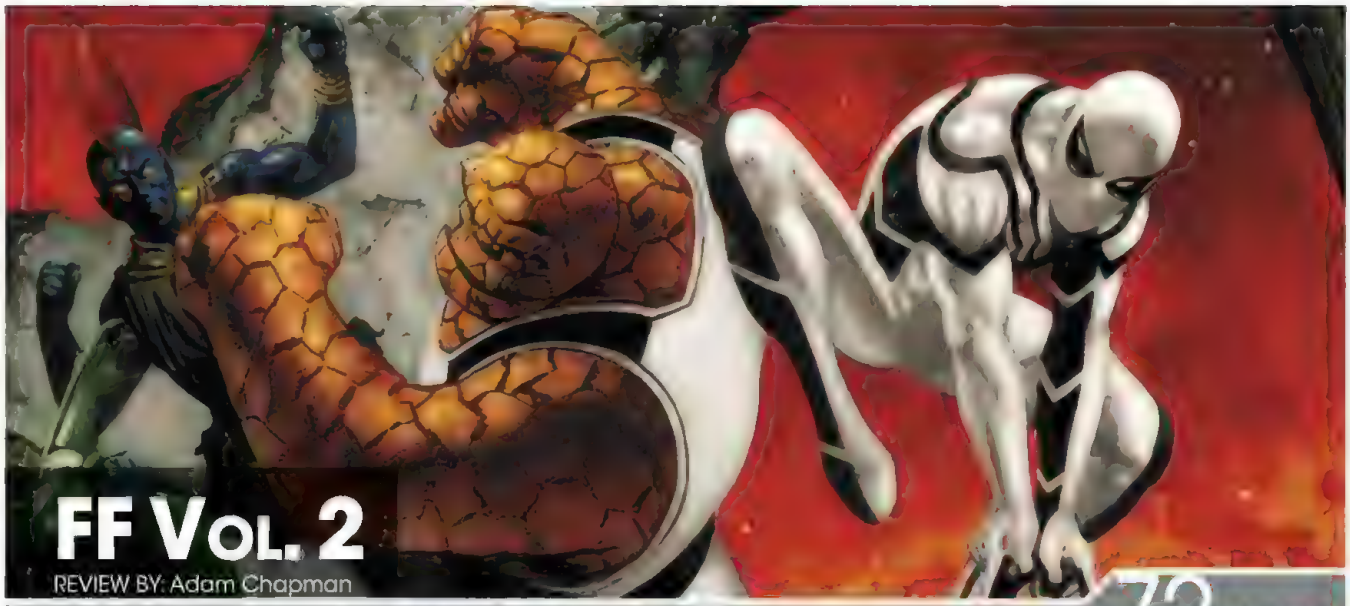
71/100

This third volume in DC Comics' new reprinting of *Batman: No Man's Land* is the penultimate volume collecting the entirety of the storyline, including chapters not included in its earlier *No Man's Land collections.* What's enjoyable about this collection and the two that preceded it is that there's a tremendous variety here in terms of the types of stories told, and the characters that feature in them. By the point in time that this series collects, the Bat-books had become familiar with the setting of *No Man's Land*, and there's a bit less of an overall direction in the books, compared to prior volumes. When the storyline first started, there was a greater sense of cohesion in the Bat-books, as they were all aligned and Batman got started on his long quest to retake Gotham, with the help of the Blue Boys and his assorted allies, including Oracle, Batgirl, Huntress, Robin and Nightwing. By the point represented by the issues collected in this volume, the status quo was clearly established, and the writers started building up to the endgame that was fast approaching for the entire *No Man's Land* concept. The next and final volume will trace that storyline to its conclusion, whereas here it's only hinted that there's an outside interest that's making a subtle play for Gotham City, by utilizing Bane to stir the fires and make it easier to do so.

This new collection is quite hefty, as it comprises twenty issues, including *Batman: Shadow of the Bat #89-92, Batman #569-571, Robin #68-72, Detective Comics #736-738, Azrael: Agent of the Bat #58, Batman: Legends of the Dark Knight #122-124* and *Batman: No Man's Land Secret Files #1.* Compared to the issues collected in prior volumes, this volume has more variety in it, with varying characters taking the spotlight, as Bane gets a significant spotlight as he returns to the city with a hidden agenda, the Joker and Harley Quinn get an amusing two-parter, Officer Bock is the focus of a storyline, as he attempts to keep his section of Gotham safe, Robin allies with some kids who are taking the events of NML as impetus to role-play as the Wolflings, and Batman allies with a former foe, Lynx. There's less world-building, less shake-ups occurring in the ongoing struggle for land and territory, which makes the volume feel a bit more disposable compared to prior volumes. Of the three published volumes thus far, this one feels less important to the overall story of *No Man's Land*, as there aren't any seismic shifts in the status quo throughout this period, aside from Bane re-entering the scene taking on a particular mission, which up until this point in the story, isn't fully revealed or explained as to its importance. Reading the book with future events in mind makes it all the more ominous when Bane completes his particular task.

The artwork is fairly stable and consistent throughout this period, and although it's not the best artwork that I've ever seen, I do have to appreciate and give credit to the various artists for managing to maintain a consistent visual look and style for Gotham City. The book always feels like it's entrenched in this ruined version of Gotham City, and the characters always look like they have been impacted by this huge change in their circumstances.

For fans of *No Man's Land*, this new series of collections is an excellent opportunity to reread a classic Batman storyline all over again, and in a much more comprehensive manner than the prior collected editions, and in a much easier manner than taking out each single issue and reading it over again. Considering how this storyline inspired aspects of *Dark Knight Rises*, it's also a refreshing read for those who liked what they saw in that movie, and wanted to see more of the *No Man's Land* concept that was briefly shown in the film. Recommended! CGM



FF Vol. 2

REVIEW BY: Adam Chapman

Publisher: MARVEL Comics Released: August 17th, 2011 Price: $21.99 CAN

72 / 100

The Fantastic Four have had many memorable runs throughout their history as a team in the Marvel Universe, with creators Stan Lee, Jack Kirby, John Byrne and Mark Waid, to name but a few, having particularly significant runs on the characters. Prior to Jonathan Hickman coming aboard Fantastic Four, Mark Millar and Bryan Hitch had collaborated on a run which failed to hit the mark critically, although commercially the book sold well, based more on the names of the collaborators, and their prior work together, than the actual work they produced on Fantastic Four. Jonathan Hickman came aboard this series with a very definite story in mind, although it wasn't immediately evident in the first year's worth of stories. But, as time passed, it became obvious to those reading the book that no issue was being wasted, as he was crafting a major epic for the Fantastic Four. After he killed off the Human Torch, he relaunched the title as *FF*, which stands for the Future Foundation, as opposed to the Fantastic Four. The first five issues were incredibly strong, as Hickman really started to show just what he was up to, pushing the story forward in big, bold ways, as well as setting up a great new concept in the Future Foundation, and really developing it further. This new collection, *FF vol. 2*, collects issues #6-#11, which build the story up to the point where the Fantastic Four title returned with issue #600, and then ran concurrently with FF.

The storytelling in these issues is extremely strong, although the first two issues stumble, as Hickman moves the focus from being on the Future Foundation, and the growing conflict on Earth with the alternate reality Reeds causing problems with their own plans, to telling the story of the Inhumans, as Black Bolt comes back to life, reclaims his throne, and Hickman reveals the secret history of the Supreme Intelligence. From there, however, he swings the focus back onto the events unfolding on Earth, and that's where the fun really starts, as Hickman starts to weave various different plot lines together, whether it's Nathaniel Richards' presence, the machinations of the alternate reality Reed Richards', the return of Black Bolt and the Inhumans to Earth and the arrival of the Kree forces above New York City. If there's any downside to the last four issues collected in this collection, it's that there's no real conclusion, as the last page is a cliff-hanger leading into future collections of Hickman's run on the *Fantastic Four / FF*.

The artwork for the first two issues is part of what disrupts the flow and tenor of Hickman's scripting, as Tocchini's artwork is not really up to the task of adequately portraying the events unfolding in Hickman's script. From there, however, Epting takes over for two issues, with Barry Kitson then illustrating the final two issues in the collection. The issues by Epting and Kitson look absolutely fantastic, and although both artists have different styles, there isn't an abrupt shift in tone, which is important for the consistency of the storyline. Thankfully the Tocchini disruption is mitigated because the events of those two issues are a flashback to the distant past, instead of focusing on the events currently unfolding in the present time.

If you haven't already started reading Hickman's run on *Fantastic Four / FF*, I cannot possibly recommend it enough. Although this collection has a few stumbles, it's still a very important chapter in his epic saga, of which this is the seventh collection that's available (Hickman's run started in *Dark Reign: Fantastic Four*, and continued in four *Fantastic Four* volumes, leading into this current run of *FF* volumes). Although Tocchini's artwork slows the momentum down on his two issues, the issues following it are exciting and full of energy and excitement. C&G

The Manhattan Projects #5

REVIEW BY: Adam Chapman

Publisher: Image Comics **Released**: June, 25, 2012 **Price**: $3.50 CAD

90/100

I'm starting to run out of adjectives to describe *Manhattan Projects*, as there's only so many ways to describe a book that is now, without a doubt, my favourite comic book being published today. It's quite an achievement that I can feel so confident about a series that only has five issues published thus far, but every issue makes me more sure of this pronouncement. *Manhattan Projects* is captivating, each and every issue, and a fantastic combination of both writing and artwork. As much as Hickman's crazy ideas keep me salivating, so too does Pitarra's artwork. I would also be remiss if I didn't include in that sentence Jordie Bellaire, because it's with Bellaire's colours that this book attains its singularly unique visual look and style.

This new issue of *Manhattan Projects*, titled Horizon, takes the universe that this book has been operating in and expands it, and I can't wait to see how the actions taken in this issue effect the rest of this book's course. Up until now, the events occurring in this book have been, for the most part, confined to the planet Earth, whether in this dimension or in another, but this issue opens up the universe. In the last issue, we saw Oppenheimer and Groves meet with an alien race, but this issue continues that confrontation to its bloody and disgusting end, which opens the eyes of those involved with the Manhattan Projects. The opening scene is pitch-perfect, and is also absolutely horrifying. Oppenheimer is one of those characters that I can't wait to see just what he'll do, because he's extremely unnerving as a character. He's always fairly reserved and quiet (at least outwardly, to his fellow scientists, as inside he's freakin' crazy with infinite Oppenheimers in his head), but this issue was the first time that anyone saw that he might be more than a little deranged, and what this might actually mean. From the looks of it, Groves didn't go any deeper into what was going on and what it means for who Oppenheimer is, but now the cat's out of the bag that Oppenheimer isn't quite normal and I wonder how this will play out in future issues. This issue features the first major foray of the *Manhattan Projects* scientists into space, after a fashion, and we're starting to see the various threads from the past few issues start to come together. Up until now, the issues have been fairly set apart as done-in-ones, but now we're seeing plot elements building upon past issues. The ending of this issue makes me wonder just what the gateway could be used for, with regards to the Infinite Oppenheimers, and the fact that they're red, just as the evil Einstein and his universe was in the prior issue.

Pitarra's artwork is absolutely brilliant in this series, and this issue he got to illustrate more creepy aliens, as we got a brief taste of his ability to illustrate aliens in the last issue. I loved his line work when detailing the aliens, as they really do look freaky and weird, just as they should. These aren't humanoid aliens like we're used to, as their bodies are weirdly shaped and detailed, although I did like that they're wearing vaguely human clothes (especially Raal at the end, with his briefs). Bellaire's colours are tremendous, as we get to see a wider colour palette in this issue once the team travels into space to confront the aliens. The stark contrast between blue and red is still found in different parts of the issue, and is one of my favourite elements of the colours in this book.

This was yet another immensely entertaining read by Hickman and Pitarra. For those readers who haven't actually picked up an issue of this fantastic series yet, there is an upcoming *Manhattan Projects: Science. Bad. TPB* being released by Image Comics next month. I'm for sure picking up the collected edition, so that I can proudly display it on my bookshelf. CGG

We're well pasted the halfway point of the year now. So, what was your most anticipated title that's been released so far? Did it live up to your expectations? What's left in the year that's been on the Comics & Gaming staff's radar for a long time?

- Yoga Castle

This year has been a great year for games so far. As for the game that had me the most excited I would have to say *Diablo III*. As a long time *Diablo* fan (having played the series since the first game) my expectations were high that this new game would be the next thing to hold my attention for months. Although *Diablo III* was a fantastic game, I find myself avoiding playing it. I hope a new expansion will change this for me. As for games the C&G office is excited for this holiday season, well that is simple, *Borderlands 2* has the office excited with almost everyone picking it up day one.

Toronto has had a pretty stellar streak of indie releases. What about Toronto is giving these artists and developers the inspiration to make games like *Sword & Sworcery, Dyad,* and *Home Horror*?

- PunchOut!

Toronto has a great feeling of community for its indie developers. Developers all work together and share ideas. This allows great concepts to get better through discussed and collaboration, and lets the bad ones to fall to the wayside. With such a great atmosphere of ideas it's pretty easy to see how so many great games have sprung up. I am sure this trend will continue with new people entering the scene every day and all bringing their own new and exciting ideas. I for one am just as eager as everyone else to see what next big indie title pops up.

The recent passing of Joe Kubert made me realize that the greats of comic book writing are all getting *really* old! How should we strive to preserve the legacy these legends set up for us? Are we as a community in a place where we can successfully carry the comic book torch in their absence?

- KaraokeBasketball

While the people that created the characters we love are aging, all hope is not yet lost for the future of comic books. We have our fair share of middle-aged comic book heroes right now, with talent like Neil Gaiman, Mike Carey, Frank Miller and Alan Moore to just name a few. As the old guard starts to step-down in one fashion or another; there is already a new crew of talent to take up the duties of being legends. And they have already proven they're up to the task. As long as comic books continue their course of developing its style and establishing its importance in story telling, we'll continue to be in a good place. C&G

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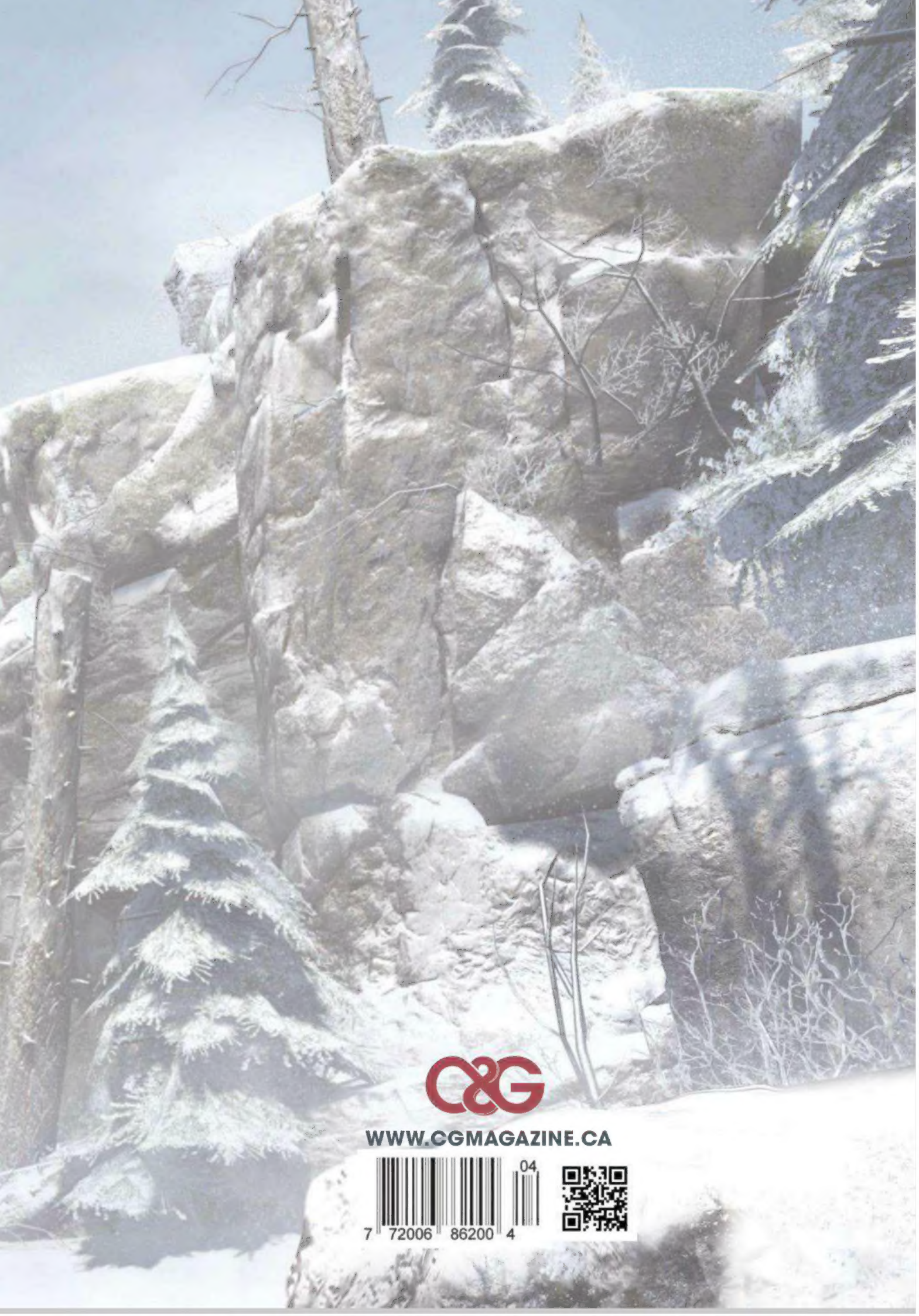

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